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# Communicative Language in the Compositional Output of Kirke Mechem

Kirstina Rasmussen Collins

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COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE COMPOSITIONAL OUTPUT OF KIRKE MECHEM

by

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## Abstract

Kirke Mechem (born 1925) has had a long career, spanning several decades. In looking at his large body of work, it is argued that the role of communicative language is central to his compositional style. This priority, originating from his own background, has influenced his choices of musical and textual language, his preferred genres of composition, and his beliefs about the role of music. The importance of communicative language in Mechem's music sets him apart in the musical landscape of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

From early on both music and the written word held a high importance for Mechem, due to the influence of his writer-father and musician-mother. This duality led him to compose extensively in vocal genres. His musical studies at Stanford and Harvard Universities encouraged him to use a tonal musical language, which was in contrast to most American universities in the post-WW2 era. Mechem believed that music could only be communicative when it used a language that its audience could understand, and so continued to communicate through the language of tonality. Likewise, Mechem sought to set texts that were intelligible to an audience, choosing vernacular texts and often communicating directly with texts that he penned himself. His value of musical and textual communication eventually led him to opera, and he wrote four (librettos and music), the most famous to date being *Tartuffe*. In the process of striving to



communicate with his audience through musical and textual language, Mechem's own personality made an imprint on his musical style. Aspects of his personality that are evident in his music are wit, humor, optimism, and social justice.

Having written over 150 choral works and four operas, Mechem has made a unique contribution to the choral and operatic repertoires through his intentional use of communicative language. Through a large-view look at his works (including their genre, subject matter, and musical style), and a study of the philosophical writings of the composer, the author has supported her thesis that the use of communicative language, both verbal and musical, is a unifying and prevalent feature in Kirke Mechem's entire compositional output.

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## Introduction

### Statement of Purpose

The American composer Kirke Mechem (b. 1925) has a compositional output which spans seven decades, with a catalogue of over 250 works.<sup>1</sup> Mechem was born and raised in Kansas and has long been based in San Francisco, CA. His style has been described as “free from any specific compositional school,”<sup>2</sup> although his use of tonality, especially in his instrumental works, set him apart from many of his contemporaries in the post-war period of the 20th century. Having studied music at Stanford and Harvard between 1946 and 1953, Mechem has written in a variety of genres, creating symphonic, chamber, operatic, and choral works. His two symphonies were premiered by the San Francisco Symphony under Josef Krips in the 1960s. He has gravitated toward writing vocal music, however, and has contributed much to the choral and operatic genres, with over 200 choral works and four operas. Mechem has received many honors and recognition from organizations including the United Nations, the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Choral Director’s Association, and the

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<sup>1</sup> “Biography”, Kirke Mechem – Composer, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.kirkemechem.com/bio.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mary Lou Humphrey, “Kirke Mechem,” *Grove Music Online*, January 1, 2002, accessed February 22, 2019, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000903001>.

National Opera Association. He received an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from the University of Kansas in 2012.<sup>3</sup> His works are published by G. Schirmer, Carl Fischer, E.C. Schirmer, and Boosey and Hawkes. Mechem has shared his ideas about music and composition throughout his career in journal articles, interviews, newspaper editorials, and most recently in his personal and professional memoir: *Believe Your Ears: Life of a Lyric Composer*, published in 2015.<sup>4</sup> When Mechem describes his compositional process, he notes that he imagines himself in the audience, hearing the music being written, and asks himself, “would I like that?”<sup>5</sup>

The sheer expansiveness of Kirke Mechem’s compositional output begs further study and analysis as one reviews his long and prolific career. Looking at his career as a whole, trends can be identified and a trajectory emerges. Studying his music in combination with his own writings about music and composition can further bring to light compositional aims and priorities that have driven the composer, shaping his significant contributions to both opera and the choral art.

The focus of this study is on how *communication with the listener* is a driving force in the musical output of Kirke Mechem. This priority can be noted through the observation of the composer’s musical language, his selection and setting of texts, his preferred genres of composition, and his priorities throughout his career. The purpose of this study is to illuminate how communicative language (both musical and textual) is

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<sup>3</sup> “Biography”, Kirke Mechem – Composer.

<sup>4</sup> Kirke Mechem, *Believe Your Ears: Life of a Lyric Composer* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Kirke Mechem, interview by the author, San Francisco, August 7, 2016.



central to Mechem's compositions and is a hallmark of his style and contribution to American music in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### **Need for the Study**

Over the past four decades, several scholars have written dissertations on the music of Kirke Mechem. These writers have analyzed particular works or subgenres within Mechem's output, such as sacred music, song cycles, or choral/orchestral works. Some have included him among other composers studied. Some have sought to identify Mechem's musical style through this analysis. The composer's own writings, including his 2015 memoir, *Believe Your Ears*, have shed some light on his process and priorities, but the composer intentionally refrains from analyzing or defining his compositional style. With seven decades of music to review, and now with the composers' memoir and writings from which to glean insight, a new study is warranted. Considering the overall impact of Kirke Mechem's career that continues even now (including his contributions to American opera), a retrospective study that takes a larger view of the composer and his work through the lens of the composer's philosophical ideas concerning communicative language will be an important contribution to the choral community, which calls Kirke Mechem their own.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study will focus on how one of Kirke Mechem's philosophical ideas, *the importance of communication with the listener*, is evident in his compositions, his choice

of texts, his musical language, his choice of genre, his philosophical writings, and the overall trends in his career. A sampling of musical selections, representing different periods in the composer's life and various subgenres, will be used to illustrate Mechem's implementation of this idea. An exhaustive analysis of every piece of the composer would be both impossible and impractical. However, the writer has been supplied the scores of nearly every choral composition of Kirke Mechem, which have been reviewed to glean overall trends and applications. Special attention will be given to the composer's choral compositions, but Mechem's works in other genres will be mentioned as well-- most extensively, his four operas.

### **Literature Review**

Existing primary and secondary sources on the composer generally fall into three categories: first, interviews with the composer, published and unpublished; second, the composer's own writings and lectures about music and composing; and third, the extended research of other scholars into aspects of Mechem's music, including several dissertations and an extensive article about Mechem's recent work that was published in 2016 in the *Choral Journal*, written by Sharon Hansen. Other than Mechem's own memoir, "Believe Your Ears: Life of a Lyric Composer," none of these sources take a look at the larger picture of Mechem's entire body of work and the connecting threads within it. Kirke Mechem himself intentionally refrains from examining his own works in an analytical way and from his writings one can gather more about his process and beliefs than about musical applications of his ideas. It is the intention of this writer to

synthesize the biographical information present in interviews and Mechem's own memoir, the philosophical ideas in the composer's many writings and lectures, and the observations and analyses made by other scholars in their studies on the composer to create a larger and summative thesis that applies to the composer's complete body of work.

All of the previous research on the composer makes this study possible. A thorough study of Mechem's early work was done by Donald Bruce Miller in his 1981 dissertation.<sup>6</sup> Although this study was specific to the sacred works of Kirke Mechem up to that point, Miller notes stylistic characteristics of the composer, and his inclination to write in a dramatic format, with recitative-like solos in his larger works. Roger MacNeill's 1987 dissertation discussed the "Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950,"<sup>7</sup> with a look at four composers who had most contributed to that genre. This study is interesting as it puts Mechem in context with other prolific choral composers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. MacNeill's research and observations regarding Mechem's engagement with text are very informative as he notes the importance of text in determining form, the composer's tendency to act as his own librettist, the clarity of Mechem's text setting,<sup>8</sup> and how Mechem's compositional style "accommodates the explicit or implicit needs of the text."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Miller, "The Choral Music of Kirke Mechem: A Study and Performance of Representative Works" (ProQuest LLC, January 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Roger MacNeill, "Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950, As Represented by the Music for This Genre by Samuel Adler, Jean Berger, Eugene Butler, and Kirke Mechem" (University Microfilms International, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 281

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 290

Later dissertations take a closer look at Mechem's large works for chorus and orchestra,<sup>10</sup> his choral cycles,<sup>11</sup> and his text setting (with a specific look at his settings of Sarah Teasdale poems).<sup>12</sup> Sharon Hansen's article, "Kirke Mechem: Songs of My Old Age and the Lost Art of Choral Storytelling"<sup>13</sup> focuses on Mechem's most recent choral works. In her analysis and background information, Hansen conveys Mechem's attention to text, the importance of text selection to the composer, and how Mechem's upbringing and early experiences helped form his desire for dramatic expression, or what she calls "storytelling." Hansen quotes Mechem's own writings about music in several places. She mentions his operas and notes the progression that occurred in Mechem's career as he shifted towards opera, and how his later choral works show the influence of his operatic writing. Although the bulk of her article is given to describing Mechem's late works, which he coined "Songs of My Old Age,"<sup>14</sup> many of her observations are in line with what this writer will explore in greater depth and detail in this study.

### **Design and Procedures**

This study will include six chapters that support the writer's thesis that the role of communicative language is central in the compositional output of Kirke Mechem. The

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Natter, "The Choral Music of Kirke Mechem: Analyses of the Larger Works for Chorus and Orchestra" (UMI Company, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Hyojin Kang, "Choral Music of Kirke Mechem: An Analytical Approach to His Choral Cycles and Representative Choral Works" (UMI Company, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Jerome Bierschenk, "An Analysis of Selected Choral Works by Kirke Mechem: Music-Textual Relationships in Settings of Poetry of Sara Teasdale" (ProQuest ILC, August 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Sharon Hansen, "Songs of My Old Age and the Lost Art of Storytelling," *Choral Journal* 57, no. 4 (November 2016): 8–31.

<sup>14</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 149.

first chapter will explore the *musical and literary roots* of the composer, looking at his upbringing and his education, experiences, mentors, and influences.

The second chapter will explore Mechem's ideas about *music as a language*, and how he employs those ideas in his melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic writing as a means of communication. This will touch on his use of consonance and dissonance, his use of text painting, and the variety within his musical language, all with the aim of communicating with the listener.

The third chapter will look specifically at Kirke Mechem's *use of text* in his choral and operatic works. Subject matter and the types of texts chosen by the composer, the primary use of the English language in his compositions, as well as the composer's propensity to create his own texts, compilations, and libretti, will be studied. The clear manner of text setting and the central focus of text in Kirke Mechem's vocal compositions will be underscored as further evidence of the composer's desire to communicate with his audience.

In the fourth chapter, the career path of the composer will be addressed, noting his *gradual move toward the operatic genre*, which perhaps contains more avenues for communication with an audience than any other genre. The larger choral/orchestral works with dramatic underpinnings, the use of the expanded genre of the choral cycle, and the desire of the composer to create his own texts, will be studied as evidence of this shift. Mechem's early experiences with opera (as a spectator) and his views on its purpose will be delineated. Subsequently, his four operas will be described.

Mechem's own *personality and the way it is expressed through his music* will be the subject of the fifth chapter. The composer's background, belief systems, values, and love of humor, wit, and gaiety will be looked at as things that the composer expresses musically in direct communication with his audience. This chapter will include a discussion of Mechem's late choral works, with an emphasis on the impact of opera writing on his compositional process, and the personal nature of these works.

To complete this study, the conclusion will address the *composer's identity as a poet/musician*, in context of the musical landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and noting elements that set him apart from other composers. Kirke Mechem's desire to communicate directly with his audience will be summarized. The self-given title from Mechem's memoir, that of "lyric composer," will be argued as truly definitive of his compositional output and his overall contribution to art music in the United States.

Each chapter will contain philosophical writings of the composer, biographical details where applicable, lists and graphs of relevant pieces, and musical examples that highlight the idea being discussed. An appendix will contain a transcription of an in-person interview of the composer by the writer, which was conducted in August of 2016.

## Chapter 1: Background

### Musical and Literary Roots, and Musical Education and Influences

Kirke Lewis Mechem's emphasis on communicative language, both musical and textual, came naturally to him. Kirke was born in 1925 in Wichita, Kansas, to a mother who was a classical pianist and a father who was a writer. Although his career path took some time to take shape, looking in hindsight the direction it took would seem inevitable. In Mechem's 2015 dedication of his book, *Believe Your Ears: Life of a Lyric Composer*, Mechem writes, "in loving memory of my father, who gave me words, and my mother, who gave me music."<sup>15</sup>

### Literary Roots

Mechem's father, Kirke Field Mechem, although self-educated, was at different times in his career a successful newspaper reporter, magazine editor and publisher, poet, novelist, and playwright. When the Great Depression hit, no longer able to sustain his magazine, *Current Contents*, he moved the young family to Topeka, Kansas in 1930, where he was hired to work as the director of the Kansas State Historical Society.<sup>16</sup> In Topeka, he dedicated more time to writing poetry and plays. His poetry was published

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<sup>15</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, v.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

in such publications as *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *Life*.<sup>17</sup> He wrote several plays, including *John Brown* which was first performed at Stanford University in 1938 and later broadcast nationally on NBC radio, and *Lilac Lake*, which was premiered at Charleston's Dock Street Theater and won the Dubose Heyward Award.<sup>18</sup>

Kirke F. Mechem encouraged his children to develop as writers, giving them lessons in writing, and teaching them to type. The young Kirke Mechem took to these lessons, and at 9 years old, started a summer newspaper, called "The Lane Local", which told all the news on his street (they lived on Lane Street). He and his "assistants" gathered news of any significance from the neighbors and printed it in their own newspaper.<sup>19</sup> In high school, he was the editor of the school newspaper and wrote skits for school assemblies. The summer after his junior year, at the onset of US involvement in World War II, Mechem was hired full-time at the *Topeka Daily Capitol* as an assistant sports editor. Mechem recounts that most of the more qualified adult men were serving in the war, and so he was given the opportunity.<sup>20</sup> With all of his early exposure to writing, it is no surprise that he began his college career at Stanford as an English major.

### **Musical Roots**

Music was not lost on the young Kirke Mechem, although it often took a back seat to sports and other activities. Music was valued in the Mechem home. He

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<sup>17</sup> Bierschenk, "An Analysis of Selected Choral Works by Kirke Mechem", 1.

<sup>18</sup> Kirke Mechem, e-mail message to author, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



remembers his parents listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcast on Saturdays and the New York Philharmonic on Sundays. Mechem's mother, Katharine Lewis Mechem, had studied piano in Munich as a young woman, and would have studied piano with the renowned teacher, Theodor Leschetizky, in Vienna, if not for World War I.<sup>21</sup> Her husband encouraged her to play the piano every day, and supported her in giving public recitals every year. Mechem recalls that he "went to bed every night listening to Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartok, and especially Chopin" (who was his mother's favorite composer).<sup>22</sup> He recently recounted, "to hear her play was to know that she felt every phrase."<sup>23</sup> Katharine taught her children piano, but young Kirke wasn't always the most willing pupil. His parents bribed him with sports equipment to get him to practice. Each six months of practice got Kirke a new ball, or bat, or racket. Kirke admits, "Once I had all the sports equipment, I quit practicing."<sup>24</sup> Kirke didn't enjoy the traditional way of learning piano as taught by his mother—he preferred to figure out tunes that he knew and liked. He thought about music more like his father, from the inside out. Although his father didn't read music, Mechem recalls that he "had the ear of a connoisseur."<sup>25</sup> His father's ear for music enabled him to sing baritone as a young man in a barbershop quartet that once sang for President William Howard Taft.

Relying on his ear, like his father, Kirke returned to the piano and music as a teen when he began picking out the tunes played on the radio show "Your Hit Parade." When

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>22</sup> Kirke Mechem, interview by Hannah Williams, phone, October 30, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Mechem, interview by the author.

<sup>24</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.

his girlfriend's brother gave him a quick tutorial in chords, explaining the difference between major, minor, augmented, diminished, and dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords, it opened a new world to Kirke. "As crude as this lesson was, it gave names and a system to what I had already been conscious of. I was a kid with a new toy."<sup>26</sup> He began writing pop songs as a teen, and, although he isn't proud of them today, they hold significance as the gateway to the path of composition for him.

In high school, Kirke Mechem was outgoing and involved in many areas, which is why he didn't participate in music in a more formal sense. He might have been considered a jack-of-all-trades: he played basketball and tennis, was on school council, acted in plays, and was the editor of the school newspaper. It wasn't until college that Mechem would "choose music."<sup>27</sup>

### **Musical Education and Influences**

After high school, Mechem served in the military during what would be the final year of World War II. He was fortunate to arrive in France after the fighting was over. During that time, he spent his spare time in search of organs or pianos, so he could work out harmonies of songs he heard.<sup>28</sup> After the war was over and he was awaiting discharge, Mechem was called to Special Services where he was assigned to write songs for USO shows. This job allowed Kirke to combine his literary and musical talents,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

although he was told later that his songs were “corny.”<sup>29</sup>

### Stanford (1946-1951)

Kirke Mechem attended Stanford University in 1946 with the assistance of the G.I. Bill and a tennis scholarship. Entering as an English major, Mechem soon recognized that he might not have the temperament required to be a novelist, who “must be a keen observer.”<sup>30</sup> He felt better suited to writing dramas, as he was a fine mimic and had a good sense for dialogue. But even there, he was unsure. He began to find his footing when he took a harmony class as an elective in the first semester of his sophomore year. Taught by Harold Schmidt, who was also Stanford’s new choral director, the class studied harmony through Bach Chorales, both by singing and analyzing them. The only thing new to him was the terminology, as the chords were already in his ear from his earlier explorations. Voice leading was a new concept as well, and Mechem began thinking of different lines of music as individual melodies that when put together, created chords.<sup>31</sup> Part of the class requirement was that students had to sing in the Stanford choir, which Schmidt directed. Surprisingly, this was the first time that Mechem had sung in a choir, and it was life-changing for him. Singing in the tenor section, Mechem remembers singing choruses from Handel’s *L’Allegro* during that first rehearsal:

As I sang my part, I was surrounded by other moving lines coming from every direction: the third of the chord from over there, the fifth from the sopranos,

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<sup>29</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

and they were all *melodies*! You must remember that I had never played in an orchestra or sung in a chorus before. My music-making had been limited to the piano keyboard: vertical chords, black and white. Here suddenly were multilayered, moving melodies that produced chords—Technicolor and 3-D! From that moment I became infatuated with choral music and began to understand the beauty of contrapuntal writing, whether vocal or instrumental.<sup>32</sup>

Mechem continued taking music theory classes and singing in the chorus. He enjoyed it and felt successful at it. In his junior year, he officially changed his major to music. That extended his undergraduate education by one year. Music was a new major at Stanford University, and Mechem was in the first graduating class of music majors. A benefit of the department's fledgling status was the very small class sizes.<sup>33</sup>

Besides Professor Harold Schmidt, who would prove to be a wonderful life-long mentor and supporter of Mechem's, Professor Leonard Ratner also proved to be an influence. A teacher of some of Mechem's theory courses, Ratner had a hands on approach, writing music with the class in the style of different composers on the chalkboard, analyzing what made a piece characteristic of the specific composer and time period. Ratner used this approach to help his students understand the music of Bach through the Impressionists, and even Schoenberg. Mechem notes that unlike other prominent music schools of the time, Ratner did not try to convince his students that tonality in the traditional sense was dead. He exposed his students to tonal and atonal works, but did not express an opinion as to the value of the latter.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>33</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

<sup>34</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 15.

Mechem remembers both teachers as being just what he needed. “Just as Ratner was the perfect teacher for the budding instrumental composer, Schmidt was ideal for the future choral composer—he exposed me to an immense number of works, old and new, European and American.”<sup>35</sup> Schmidt also supported Mechem as a composer by having the chorus perform all of Mechem’s student compositions for chorus, and suggesting he go to Harvard, his own alma mater, to study with Randall Thompson and Walter Piston. Mechem followed Schmidt’s advice, and attended Harvard University for his MA in Music between 1951 and 1953.

#### Harvard (1951-1953)

At Harvard, as at Stanford, Mechem never had private composition lessons. In that regard, he states jokingly that, as he never studied privately with any one teacher, “no one is to blame.” He claims to be self-taught, not following any particular compositional school, but rather, his own taste and personal voice.<sup>36</sup> At Harvard, he did have composition classes with Randall Thompson and Walter Piston. Mechem remembers that Thompson insisted that his students learn to compose with traditional harmony and counterpoint before writing in a dissonant way. His first assignment was to write a choral piece using only root position triads. The next was to write a short choral piece using imitation at various intervals. Randall Thompson taught his students to begin their compositional process by identifying the contrapuntal possibilities of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Leslie Guelker-Cone, “Kirke Mechem--An Interview,” *Choral Journal* (April 1987): 20.

melody they were writing. Mechem points out in his book that this very idea is rooted in tonality, with an understanding of the inherent consonance and dissonance that arise with intentional counterpoint. Mechem used the same melodic material for the second assignment, combined it with the first, and later published it as Psalm 100, Op. 2, No. 1 (which has been sung often by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir).<sup>37</sup>

As seen in this assignment, the “Thompsonian Style,” according to Mechem, is conservative, primarily triadic, with a traditional use of counterpoint (Fig. 1.1). After leaving Harvard, Mechem used that style in writing some of his sacred works, but generally chose a freer tonality, one that blended triadic harmony with quartal sonorities and tone clusters.

5

13 *mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -  
*mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -  
*mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -  
*mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -  
*mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -  
*mf* *mp* *poch. ritard. dim.*  
 God; it is He Who hath made us, and not we our -

<sup>37</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 22.

43 **Tempo I°** (♩ = 116)

*legato*  
truth en - dur - eth all \_\_\_\_ gen - er - a - tions, bless the

*mf* *legato*  
His truth en - dur - eth all \_\_\_\_ gen - er -

**Tempo I°** (♩ = 116)

46 *mf* *legato*  
His truth en - dur - eth all \_\_\_\_ gen - er - a - tions,  
Lord, bless the Lord, bless the Lord,  
a - tions, bless the Lord, bless the Lord, bless \_\_\_\_

*mf* *legato*  
His truth en - dur - eth all \_\_\_\_

Figure 1.1. Root position chords and tonal counterpoint in Kirke Mechem, "Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord," Op. 2, No. 1, pp. 5 and 9 (Boston: E.C. Schirmer Music Company, 1961).

On the train ride home to California from Harvard, Mechem wrote his Three Madrigals, Op. 1., that employ this freer sense of tonality. Inspired by the Six Chansons of Hindemith, these pieces were settings of poetry by his father, Kirke F. Mechem.<sup>38</sup> The following example comes from the third madrigal, “Moral Precept” (Fig. 1.2). Here, Mechem employs a harmonic language that includes tone clusters and quartal and quintal harmonies in addition to its triadic underpinnings.

Although he would often choose to use a more expanded tonal language than his Harvard professor, Mechem states that Randall Thompson had a great influence on him as a composer. One of the unusual points of connection between the two composers is that Mechem met his wife, Donata Coletti, while at Harvard; she happened to be Randall Thompson’s niece.

#### Vienna (1956-1957, 1961-1963)

Mechem’s time in Vienna must also be included as an influential part of his musical education. After completing his MA in Music at Harvard, Mechem returned to Stanford as Harold Schmidt’s assistant for three years. Hearing about a possible full-time job opportunity for Mechem at Harvard that would open in one year (unknownst to Mechem), Schmidt suggested he go abroad to Vienna for a year, in hopes that Mechem wouldn’t take a tenure track job that would keep him from accepting the post at Harvard that would be shortly coming available. Mechem again followed Schmidt’s advice, and he and his wife traveled to Vienna in 1956 and remained

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 30.



there for a year. Only many years later would he find out the reason for Schmidt's initial encouragement to go to Vienna.<sup>39</sup>

Kirke F. Mechem *a cappella* Kirke L. Mechem

Allegro scherzando (♩ = 144)

Soprano *p* Like the rain-drops on the walk, like the rain - drops, *cresc. poco a poco*

Alto *p* Like the rain-drops on the walk, like the *cresc. poco a poco*

Tenor *p* Like the rain-drops on the

Bass *p* Like the

Piano (For rehearsal only) *p* *cresc. poco a poco*

Allegro scherzando (♩ = 144)

5

S. rain - drops, like the rain-drops on the walk Hiss\*

A. *poco* rain - drops, rain - drops, like the rain-drops on the walk

T. *cresc. poco a poco* walk, like the rain - drops, rain - drops, like the

B. *cresc. poco a poco* rain-drops on the walk, like the rain - drops,

5

\* Hold the "ss" throughout the measure to give a hissing sound.

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<sup>39</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

S. the words of an-gry talk, an-gry talk,

A. Hiss\* the words of an-gry talk,

T. rain-drops on the walk Hiss\* the words of

B. rain - drops, like the rain-drops on the walk Hiss\*

S. an-gry, an-gry talk, hiss the words of an-gry talk.

A. an-gry talk, an-gry talk, hiss the words of an-gry talk.

T. an-gry talk, an-gry talk, hiss the words of an-gry talk.

B. the words of an-gry talk, hiss the words of an-gry talk.

\* Hold the "ss" throughout the measure to give a hissing sound.

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Figure 1.2. Tone clusters and triadic, quartal, and quintal harmony in Kirke Mechem, "Moral Precept," Op. 1, No. 3, mm. 1-13 (Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1957).

When Kirke and Donata Mechem arrived in Vienna in 1956, it still looked like a war zone. The exchange rate was highly favorable, making room and board and most importantly, concert tickets, extremely affordable for the Mechems. Kirke remembers, “Our first concert was a performance of Bach’s B-minor Mass in the *Musikverein* hall. At the opening sound of those two great ‘Kyrie Eleisons,’ we both broke into tears. Finally, this was why we were here.”<sup>40</sup> Having been brought up in Kansas, with very few opportunities to go to classical music concerts, and lacking the means to travel to concerts in San Francisco during his time at Stanford, Mechem felt he was receiving a long-awaited immersive musical education. He describes his daily schedule in Vienna:

Mornings, I composed; afternoons, I studied and sometimes went to Doblinger’s *Musikhaus*, where I could buy secondhand scores of symphonies and chamber music for a pittance. Almost every evening I went to a concert, reading a newly bought pocket score on the streetcar.<sup>41</sup>

Vienna was a music-loving city, and there were multiple symphonies, chamber groups, and opera companies that were performing regularly, so that Mechem could literally hear a concert every day. He recalls that in Vienna, he was “drunk on music.”<sup>42</sup> On one occasion, he attended a “church concert in the morning, a symphony in the afternoon, and an opera at night.”<sup>43</sup> The Viennese’s engagement with music and their intimate understanding and enjoyment of it, made a lasting impact on Kirke Mechem and how he viewed the role of music. During the Vienna years, one might say that Mechem’s influences were the composers he heard at all of the concerts he attended.

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<sup>40</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

In this immersive environment, in his first year there, he wrote a piano trio and several art songs. He began to really believe he could “be a composer.”<sup>44</sup>

It was at this time that he received a telegram from Harvard University, offering him a teaching and conducting job. Mechem turned it down. He recalled,

I knew that that was a defining moment. If I took that job, I was essentially going to be a teacher and a conductor, not a composer except peripherally...I was already in my early thirties by this time; if I didn’t make a decision to become a composer then, I probably never would. When my wife and I came back to this country I took only part-time teaching jobs and was able to compose almost full time.<sup>45</sup>

After this pivotal decision, the Mechem’s would return to Vienna in 1961, this time with their two young daughters. They would remain avid concert-goers, both during their time there and after they returned to San Francisco in 1963. Mechem expanded his musical palette through his study and experience of many musical works. He has stated that composers he found influential on his music were Bartok, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Gershwin, Copland, and Hindemith as well as composers of past musical eras such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. “We learn from them all and we learn to avoid their most characteristic mannerisms. We have to find our own way.”<sup>46</sup> After all his formative and educational experiences, Kirke Mechem had begun to find his way. He had formed his identity as a composer, found his voice, and with it was ready to communicate.

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<sup>44</sup> Mechem, interview with Hannah Williams.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

## Chapter 2: Communication through Musical Language

Perhaps due to his particularly literary upbringing, Kirke Mechem has always believed that music is itself a language, and therefore, a vehicle of communication. This belief has been a guidepost for Mechem's career as a composer. As a youngster, Mechem heard the strains of Romantic music played daily by his mother, a repertoire that was known for its dramatic and expressive qualities. This soundworld laid an early foundation for Mechem's understanding of music. Additionally, many composers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century expanded the language of tonality, without altering its underpinnings. Composers like Debussy, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Gershwin, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Bartok, were all beloved by Mechem. In the United States, tonal composers like Samuel Barber and Roy Harris were celebrated. However, after World War II, something shifted. As Mechem describes it, atonality began to dominate in academic institutions and musical intellectual circles. Mechem writes in his book, *Believe Your Ears*, "someone had apparently decided that music was simply 'organized sound'."<sup>47</sup>

As Mechem decided upon music during his Stanford career, he was not taught by teachers with an atonal agenda. None of his professors wrote atonal music. However,

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<sup>47</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 22, ix

just across the bay, the music department at U.C. Berkeley was a leading proponent of atonality. As Mechem remembers, Roger Sessions, Andrew Imbry, and Leon Kirchner were all there, and taught atonality to their students exclusively.<sup>48</sup> At Berkeley and many other leading institutions of music, many composers and academics claimed that music was a science, and as such was subject to new systems, organization, and experimentation. Mechem reasons in his book,

I have come to believe that equating music with science was the root cause of the calamity that befell classical music. Those composers who considered music a science were obliged to keep up with the latest developments, experiments, and theories, however extreme or arcane.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the reason that Mechem saw this development or shift in classical music as a “calamity” was due to his underlying belief that music was a language. And if music is a language, it needs to be understood by its audience. Mechem observed that as music became seen as a science, it began to lose its audience. He said, “The late 20<sup>th</sup> century was the first time in history that most classical-music lovers preferred music of past centuries to that of their own.”<sup>50</sup> For some composers, a shrinking audience was no deterrent, as they wrote only for themselves and for the progress of avant-garde music. But because of Mechem’s belief that music (a language) should communicate with its audience, he could not adopt such a stance, nor the avant-garde style that it supported. He writes, “If we composers are not understood by our contemporaries, we

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<sup>48</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

<sup>49</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, xi.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

are simply spinning our wheels.”<sup>51</sup> It was fortunate then, for Mechem, during his education at Stanford and Harvard, to be taught by teachers who believed in a continuation and expansion of a tonal music language, and not a discarding of it. He was told on one occasion, however, by Aaron Copland, during a residency at Harvard, that although he liked Mechem’s music, he needed to “enter the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>52</sup> Although he soon adopted a freer use of tonality than his student works at Harvard demonstrated, Mechem would not be a stranger to the harsh words of music critics who espoused the avant-garde style and saw music as a science. As a post-World War II composer in America, he was, in a real sense, at odds with the musical elite.

### **Music as Language**

In asserting that music is a language, by no means was Kirke Mechem saying that it was to be stagnant or unchanging. He notes in *Believe Your Ears* how tonality was expanded by Debussy, Bartok, Stravinsky, and Hindemith. But like spoken language, for it to remain comprehensible, Mechem argues that musical language must evolve slowly. As an example, Mechem points out that society still likes Shakespeare’s words and Bach’s music.<sup>53</sup> Regarding the way musical language was used and expanded by like-minded composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he stated:

For composers who considered music a language, communication with their listeners was of primary importance. Their compositions followed an evolutionary path and were meant to be comprehensible to music lovers of their

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xi.

own time... In no way did we feel that we were flogging a dead horse, as was sometimes charged by the more vocal avant-garde.<sup>54</sup>

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, critics were more accepting of tonal music written for choirs than tonal music written for instruments. And although Mechem from the start had written choral music, perhaps a “safer” genre for a tonal composer, he did not shy away from writing instrumental works, for which he used a more adventurous tonal palate. He wrote two symphonies, an overture, and many chamber works. And although they do not have lyrics, they are still lyric in quality—expressive and dramatic. When he returned from Vienna in 1963, he became connected with the Austrian conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, Josef Krips, who had become familiar with Mechem in Austria. He premiered both of Mechem’s symphonies with his orchestra in the 1960’s, to both public and critical acclaim.

When Mechem was asked to write an article about his first symphony in San Francisco’s *Sunday Chronicle* in order to prepare the public to hear his piece the following week, Mechem seized the opportunity to share his ideas on the importance of music as a language, and as an art to be appreciated and understood by its audience. After discussing his belief that music was *not* a science, but a language, he stated, “its vocabulary is not static, but as with any language, is constantly changing, not only through daily usage, but also through the imaginative treatment of artists.”<sup>55</sup> In a stinging judgment of composers who didn’t try to communicate with their audience but

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 71.



wrote only for themselves, he said, “their work is then self-therapy and will only accidentally be art. And their avowed noncommunication itself communicates something.”<sup>56</sup> Then, appealing to his audience’s innate musical understanding, he said:

If all of this seems like a roundabout way to prepare readers to hear my symphony this week, it is because I don’t think they need any preparation other than being sensitive to music. You will find no analytic notes in the program because I haven’t written any.<sup>57</sup>

Mechem may have won over many listeners by his bold article, and his first symphony was a tremendous success (Krips commissioned him to write his Second Symphony for the ensemble a few years later). He made some enemies as well, however, both in academic and critical circles. In his book, he states that over fifty years later, he still believes most of what he wrote in that article, although he has more respect for those of differing views, noting that some composers intentionally write for a more specialized “niche” audience.<sup>58</sup>

### **Mechem’s Musical Language & Style**

Mechem’s style has been described in Grove Music Online as “characterized by melodiousness, lyricism, tonal clarity, wit and humor, ...free of any specific compositional school.”<sup>59</sup> Many have considered him a musical “conservative”, but Mechem prefers the term “conservationist,” since he, like conservationists in the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>59</sup> Humphrey, “Kirke Mechem,” *Grove Music Online*.

environmental movement, wants to preserve what is good.<sup>60</sup> In his *Sunday Chronicle* article in 1965, he identified his influences by naming a farcical and fictitious compositional school he belonged to, “namely, the neo-Baroque-Classic-Romantic-Modern-Avant-Traditional-Imaginists.”<sup>61</sup> As he jokingly acknowledged, for his own tonal language, Mechem has drawn from a large musical palate, depending on the piece he is working on and his musical influences at the time. He has pointed out that every composer first learns by imitating, but must eventually find their own voice that comes from their own uniqueness and all of their influences. He stated:

I have chosen to compose in the language I inherited—shaping and changing it according to my own ideas and personality, as a novelist or playwright does. I can’t imagine wanting to divorce myself completely from that virtuoso and still flexible language that has been built up for centuries by countless composers.<sup>62</sup>

Others who have studied Kirke Mechem’s music have observed that he combines modern and traditional devices, avoids avant-garde techniques,<sup>63</sup> and has a flexibility in rhythm, meter, and tonal language. His use of texture is characterized as ranging between contrapuntal and homophonic, with individual lines being emphasized. His harmonic language combines tertian harmonies with more modern harmony (quartal, quintal, and tone clusters).<sup>64</sup> To summarize, Roger MacNeill (in his dissertation, “Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950”) characterized Mechem as being “an eclectic who freely chooses the methods and techniques suitable to the particular type

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<sup>60</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

<sup>61</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>63</sup> Kang, “Choral Music of Kirke Mechem,” 4.

<sup>64</sup> Bierschenk, “Analysis of Selected Choral Works,” 4-5.

of work being written.”<sup>65</sup> This flexibility underscores Mechem’s desire to communicate with his audience through the language of music, in all its variety. The text being set, or the situation being portrayed, determine Mechem’s choice of musical language. However, in his book he concurred with Mozart (quoting a letter he wrote his father in 1782) in saying, “music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear.”<sup>66</sup>

Drawing upon the musical language he inherited (a language that was understood by the audiences he was writing for), Mechem manipulates various musical elements, allowing him to communicate with optimal expression. Examples of this include his use of consonance & dissonance, shifting meter, tempo flexibility, and text painting.

### Consonance and Dissonance

To explore Mechem’s use of consonance and dissonance in his musical style, two pieces from his cycle *Five Centuries of Spring* will be examined. In this choral cycle, each piece is a setting of a text about spring from a different century, beginning with a setting of a 16<sup>th</sup> century poem entitled “Spring” by Thomas Nash, and ending with a 20<sup>th</sup> century poem, also entitled “Spring” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Mechem intentionally incorporates elements from the older centuries’ musical styles. Looking at the final two pieces in this cycle, “Loveliest of Trees,” and “Spring,” Mechem’s use of consonance and dissonance to express text and mood is very apparent. In the fourth movement,

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<sup>65</sup> MacNeill, “Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950,” 223.

<sup>66</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 73.

“Loveliest of Trees,” Mechem set a poem of A.E. Housman, written in 1896, that depicts a young man going out in nature to see the cherry blossoms, realizing that he will only have “fifty more” springs to enjoy:

Loveliest of Trees

By A.E. Housman

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.<sup>67</sup>

Mechem chooses a tonal language to depict the “loveliness” of the cherry tree, and the realization of the passing nature of time and beauty. He sets this poem in A minor, but borrows from A major, most often for the tonic chord. Mechem sets the middle stanza of the poem in G minor, then moves back to A minor with major borrowings in the final stanza. The setting begins with an A major chord, but within the first measure, the C sharp shifts to C natural, as an A minor tonality sets in. Still, within the minor key, Mechem often gravitates to the major chords, III, VI, VII, and of course, borrows from the major mode for the I chord. This communicates the beauty and

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<sup>67</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Loveliest of Trees,” for mixed chorus (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1968), 2.

loveliness of nature. His frequent use of ninth chords creates a more modern sound and also brings out the intensity of feeling from the young man depicted in the poem. The melodic lines are very smooth, with imitative sections set in diatonic language that are flowing and beautiful. The overall tonality is decidedly consonant, which communicates the emotion of the poem.

**Andante con moto** ♩ - ca. 96 (quasi in 1)

*mp*

Soprano  
Love-liest of trees, the cher-ry now is

Alto  
Love-liest of trees, the cher-ry now is

Tenor  
Love-liest of trees, the cher-ry now is

Bass  
Love-liest of trees, the cher-ry now is

**Andante con moto** ♩ - ca. 96 (quasi in 1)

Piano (only for rehearsal)

**poch. rall.** **a tempo** *p poco cresc.*

hung with bloom a - long the bough, And stands a -

*p poco cresc.*

hung with bloom a - long the bough, And stands a -

*dolce p poco cresc.*

hung with bloom a - long the bough, And stands a -

*p poco cresc.*

hung with bloom a - long the bough, And stands a -

**poch. rall.** **a tempo**

4

rall. a tempo

*mf* *p*

bout the wood - land ride Wear - - ing white\_\_ for

*mf* *p*

bout the wood - land ride Wear - - ing

*mf* *p*

bout the wood - land ride Wear-ing

*mf*

bout the wood - land ride

rall. a tempo

*cresc. poco a poco*

East - er - tide. \_\_\_\_\_ Now, of my three-score

*cresc. poco a poco*

white for East - er - tide. \_\_\_\_\_ Now, of my

*cresc. poco a poco*

white\_\_ for East - er - tide. \_\_\_\_\_ Now, of my

*p* *cresc. poco a poco*

Wear-ing white\_\_ for East - er - tide. Now, of my three-score

Figure 2.1. Consonance in Kirke Mechem, "Loveliest of Trees,"  
Op. 24, No. 4, pp. 3 and 4 (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1968).

In contrast, Mechem's setting of "Spring" by 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Edna St. Vincent Millay is extremely dissonant. In order to communicate the text of her biting poem musically, he employed a very dissonant tonal language. The poem reads:

Spring

By Edna St. Vincent Millay

To what purpose, April, do you return again?  
Beauty is not enough.  
You can no longer quiet me with the redness  
Of little leaves opening stickily.  
I know what I know.  
The sun is hot on my neck as I observe  
The spikes of the crocus.  
The smell of the earth is good.  
It is apparent that there is no death.  
But what does that signify?  
Not only under ground are the brains of men  
Eaten by maggots.  
Life in itself  
Is nothing,  
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.  
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,  
April  
Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.<sup>68</sup>

For his setting, Mechem chooses not to have the stability of a key center. Instead, it shifts frequently, and he even employs polytonality with different voices in different keys to communicate the sarcasm and spite within the poem. For instance, Mechem sets the last line of the poem contrapuntally in tight imitation, with entrances in three incompatible keys, creating a very dissonant counterpoint that depicts April like an "idiot, babbling and strewing flowers." For the melodic lines, Mechem chooses the most

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<sup>68</sup> Kirke Mechem, "Spring (Edna St. Vincent Millay)," for mixed chorus, (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1968), 3.

dissonant of intervals to dominate the setting: the tritone, the minor second, the major seventh. These prevalent intervals communicate the anger and despair in the poem effectively. Mechem interweaves consonant harmonies with these sonorities to give even greater communicative power to the dissonance when it arises.

8

un - derground are the brains of men Eat - en by mag-gots. Life in it -

un - derground are the brains of men Eat - en by mag-gots. Life in it -

un - derground are the brains of men Eat - en by mag-gots. Life in it -

un - derground are the brains of men Eat - en by mag-gots. Life in it -

stringendo

self Is noth-ing, An emp - ty cup, a flight of un - car-pet-ed stairs.

self Is noth-ing, An emp - ty cup, a flight of un - car-pet-ed stairs.

self Is noth-ing, An emp - ty cup, a flight of un - car-pet-ed stairs.

self Is noth-ing, An emp - ty cup, a flight of un - car-pet-ed stairs.

stringendo



9

**Ritenuato, pesante** ♩ - ca. 66 **accel.**

*ff marcatisissimo*

It is not e - nough that year - ly, down this hill, A - pril

*ff marcatisissimo*

It is not e - nough that year - ly, down this hill, A - pril

*ff marcatisissimo*

It is not e - nough that year - ly, down this hill,

*ff marcatisissimo*

It is not e - nough that year - ly, down this hill,

**Ritenuato, pesante** ♩ - ca. 66 **accel.**

**molto**

Comes like an id - iot, bab - bling and strew - ing flow'rs like an id - iot,

Comes like an id - iot, bab - bling and strew - ing flow'rs like an id - iot,

A - pril Comes like an id - iot, bab - bling and strew - ing — flow - ers,

A - pril Comes like an id - iot, comes like a bab - bling id -

**molto**

Figure 2.2. Dissonance in Kirke Mechem, "Spring (Edna St. Vincent Millay)", Op. 24, No. 5, pp. 8 and 9 (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1968).

These examples from *Five Centuries of Spring* show how the composer uses musical language, with its understood implications, to communicate a wide spectrum of emotions and ideas, from beauty, to regret, to anger, to sarcasm.

### Rhythm & Meter

Much of Mechem's choral and vocal music could be characterized as having a flexibility of rhythm. This often is manifested by shifting meters. It is observed that the composer employs shifting meters for two purposes: (1) for the text to be most clearly delivered, and (2) to go against the audience's expectations in order to express an emotion or idea. In the following example, Mechem employs shifts in rhythm and meter in order to create a playful and humorous experience for the audience.

"Kansas Boys", from Mechem's cycle *American Madrigals*, is an original treatment of a traditional American folk song. In his notes on the published score, Mechem states that "the folk material, both words and music, has been altered, added to and juxtaposed at will."<sup>69</sup> Rarely does the audience get what they expect in this humorous setting. Sections of phrases are lengthened by interrupting the cut-time feel with bars of 3/2, making the return to cut-time refreshing and surprising for the listener (these returns are also accompanied with sudden key shifts as well). In the middle of "Kansas Boys", Mechem introduces a very familiar folk song to the mix—"Home on the Range"(the official song of the state of Kansas). Sung by the basses, the melody

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<sup>69</sup> Kirke Mechem, "Kansas Boys" for Chorus of Mixed Voices, *a cappella* or with Piano or Instrumental Ensemble (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1976), 2.

interrupts the tune of the other voices, creating a lurching between the duple feel of Kansas Boys, and the triple feel of Home on the Range. Then, all of a sudden, the upper voices take over the tune of Home on the Range, while the basses snap back into cut time, bringing the choir back to their original melody.

8

plain; That's the way with the Kan - sas range. *ff* *f*

div. unis. plain; That's the way with the Kan - sas range. Hom-i - ny, -

8 fras tea, That's the way with the Kan - sas range. *ff* *f*

fras tea, That's the way with the Kan - sas range. *ff* *f*

*Ped.* *Ped.*

35

Hom-i - ny, Home is a cab-in with a *f*

Home is a cab-in with a *f*

Home is a cab-in with a *f*

Home is a cab-in with a *f*

Give me a home *f*

40

N5697

big log wall, Nar-y a win-dow in it at all,  
big log wall, Nar-y a win-dow in it at all,  
big log wall, Nar-y a win-dow in it at all,  
— where the buf-fa-lo roam, — Where the

45 Smok-y chim-ney and a shak-y floor,  
Smok-y chim-ney and a shak-y floor,  
Smok-y chim-ney and a shak-y floor,  
deer and the an-te-lope play; Where sel-dom is

45

N5997

Figure 2.3. Rhythm and meter in Kirke Mechem, “Kansas Boys”, Op. 46, No. 3, pp. 8 and 9 (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1976).

Mechem’s constant manipulation of rhythm and meter keeps the audience engaged and surprised in this entirely original treatment.

## Tempo

Similar to his frequent use of meter changes, Mechem is equally fluid with his tempo indications. Sometimes subtle and sometimes abrupt, his shifts in tempo are always linked to the subtle or obvious shifts in mood within the text being set. For Mechem, shifts in tempo create meaning and are a tool of communication. To look at his interplay with tempo, two pieces will be examined, one written at the beginning of his career, and one written very recently: “Moral Precept” (1957) and “The Gift of Singing” (2015). In addition to looking at Mechem’s treatment of tempo, their tonal and rhythmic qualities will be observed as well.

In “Moral Precept,” Mechem set a poem of his father:

### Moral Precept

By Kirke F. Mechem

Like the raindrops on the walk,  
Hiss the words of angry talk.  
Foaming darkly in the gutter  
Pours the rage they rashly utter.  
Boiling downward, they deliver  
Their disturbance to the river.  
Then their furious commotion  
Floods the river to the ocean.  
There the tempest’s awful breath  
Sucks the sailor down to death.  
Clear as water; then, this moral:  
Never, never, never quarrel.<sup>70</sup>

The setting of his father’s poem begins with a very steady and fast tempo that depicts one thing leading to another to another, as the poem describes. When the poem

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<sup>70</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Moral Precept,” for Four-Part Chorus of Mixed Voices (Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1957).

reaches its climax, Mechem likewise indicates an *accelerando* as the sailor gets sucked  
 “down to death,” aptly followed by a *fermata* on a rest.

8

S. breath Sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, 45

A. breath Sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, 45

T. pest's aw - ful breath Sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, 45

B. pest's aw - ful breath Sucks the sail - or, sucks the sail - or, 45

accel. *sfp* *a tempo* 50

S. sucks the sail - or down to death. Clear as wa-ter, then, this

A. sucks the sail - or down to death. Clear as

T. sucks the sail - or down to death.

B. sucks the sail - or down to death. *pp* *a tempo* 50

AMP-95530

60

*ff*

S. nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

A. nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

T. nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

B. er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

60

Grave (♩ = 52)

*p dolce*

65

*accel. poco*

S. Nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

A. Nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

T. Nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

B. Nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er, nev-er,

65

Grave (♩ = 52)

*p dolce*

*accel. poco*

AMP-95530

Figure 2.4. Tempo in Kirke Mechem, "Moral Precept," Op. 1, No. 3, pp. 8 and 10 (Associated Music Publishers, 1957).

After a brief *a tempo* section, on the text “Clear as water; then, this moral,” Mechem sets apart the moral from the rest of the piece by changing the tempo from *Allegro Scherzando* to *Grave*. His *molto accelerando* and return to *Grave* as the choir finally sings the moral, “never quarrel,” brings out the humor in Kirke F. Mechem’s poem.

These key moments are also highlighted by Mechem’s choice of meter and tonal language. The meter in the first nine lines of text is 3/4. Then, on “sucks the sailor down to death”, Mechem shifts to a driving 4/4 time. In the final *Grave* section, Mechem abandons the triple scherzo feel for a stately 4/4. These changes combine with the composer’s tempo changes to communicate shifts within the poetry itself. Likewise, the tonal language of the analogy in the poem is stark: mostly quartal, quintal, with some tone clusters. The tonal language of the moral, however, is presented in lush seventh and ninth chords and major harmonies. This shift in tonal language adds to the humor of the conclusion.

“The Gift of Singing”, written in 2015, is unique in that it combines seven text sources compiled by Mechem.<sup>71</sup> In this piece the tempo shifts are often directly related to the shifts in text source. The piece alternates between slow and fast tempos, as implied by the texts being set. The beginning and end of the piece are unified in their tempo (*adagio semplice*) and key center (flowing between D minor and F major). These bookend sections are characterized by their fluidity of meter, both in the piano and choir parts. This shifting meter aims to create a true legato and flowing character, as

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<sup>71</sup> Kirke Mechem, “The Gift of Singing” (New York: G. Schirmer, 2015), 2.



Mechem sets a text about the endless song. Mechem's harmonic language in this piece is almost exclusively triadic, fluctuating between major and minor to depict emotional variation stemming from the texts. Mechem adds sevenths, ninths, and tone clusters in the piano part, giving interest.

K. M., adapted and edited from various sources

Kirke Mechem  
Op.82

*Adagio semplice, like a folk song* ♩ = ca. 52-56

*pp*  
I have no

*pp*  
I have no

*pp*  
I have no

*pp*  
I have no

*Adagio semplice, like a folk song* ♩ = ca. 52-56

*pp* *mp* *pp*

*una corda*

6

*mp* *mp* *p*

thing that is mine sure\_ to give you, I am born so poor.

*mp* *p*

thing that is mine sure\_ to give you, I am born so poor. What-

*mp* *p*

thing that is mine sure\_ to give you, I am born so poor. What-

*mp* *p*

thing that is mine sure\_ to give you, I am born so poor.

*mp* *p* *pp*

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48 *rall.* **Meno mosso**

a song. \_\_\_\_\_

a song. \_\_\_\_\_

a song. \_\_\_\_\_

a song. \_\_\_\_\_

a song. \_\_\_\_\_

I don't

*rall.* **Meno mosso**

*f* *p*

53 *accel.* **Allegro**

*accel.*

*accel.*

*f*

I'm hap - py be - cause I

*accel.* *f*

sing be - cause I'm hap - py; — I'm hap - py be - cause I

*accel.* **Allegro**

*cresc.* *f*

THE GIFT OF SINGING

Figure 2.5. Meter and tempo in Kirke Mechem, “The Gift of Singing,” Op. 82, pp. 3 and 8 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2015).

Table 2.1. Texts and tempos in “The Gift of Singing”

1.	I have no thing that is mine sure to give you, I am born so poor. Whatever I have was given me: the earth, the air, the sun, the sea. If I have anything to give made surely of the life I live, It is a song that I have made. Now in your keeping it is laid. --George Dillon (1906-1968)	SLOW
2.	How can I keep from singing? – 19 <sup>th</sup> century hymn	SLOW
3.	The only thing better than singing is more singing. --Ella Fitzgerald	FAST
4.	A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song. --Chinese proverb	FAST
5.	I don't sing because I'm happy; I'm happy because I sing. --William James	SLOW/FAST
6.	Some days there won't be a song in your heart. Sing anyway! --Emory Austin	SLOW/FAST
7.	Sing out loud in the car, especially if it embarrasses your children. --Marilyn Penland	FAST
(2.)	How can I keep from singing? My life flows on in endless song, I hear the music ringing; It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing? <sup>72</sup>	SLOW

*Source:* Kirke Mechem, “The Gift of Singing”

In his tempo indication at the beginning of the piece, Mechem writes, “like a folk song.”

This indication is evident in the tonal language of the work.

### Text Painting

Mechem often chooses his tonal and rhythmic language with the aim to paint the text through music. In each of the above examined pieces, examples of text painting can be identified. In “Loveliest of trees” (Fig. 2.1), Mechem paints the word “bloom” (m. 6) by stretching the measure to 4/4 and setting the word with a rising melisma. In the next measure, he paints the phrase “along the bough” with another 4/4 measure, and a soprano line that shows the literal contour of a bough, with a slight rise and then a gentle arching downward. In “Spring” (Fig. 2.2), Mechem shows “a flight of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

uncarpeted stairs” musically through a melodic line that skips upward. In “Moral Precept” (Fig. 2.3), Mechem depicts the sailor getting sucked “down to death” with an accelerating line, falling chromatically in the tenor and bass parts, and plunging down the octave in the sopranos and altos. In “The Gift of Singing” (Fig. 2.4), the line “I don’t sing because I’m happy; I’m happy because I sing,” is set with extreme contrasts, depicting the dichotomy of the text: The first phrase is set for soli basses, low in their range, singing slowly in C minor. Then the tempo quickens and the tenors and basses sing the latter phrase high in their range, quickly, in a bright C major. These examples are only a few samples of the many moments of text painting that can be found in these particular pieces, which are representative of Mechem’s works as a whole.

### **Musical Language in Mechem’s Operas**

Perhaps more important to Mechem than text painting, which depicts specific words or phrases musically, is choosing a musical language that embodies the overall mood or dramatic impulse of the poem. This explains the endless variety one can find in Mechem’s musical vocabulary when comparing different examples of his music. Each piece has its own unique sound world, defined by Mechem’s understanding of the text being set: its mood, its ideas, and its dramatic flow. This can be especially seen in Mechem’s operas, where the composer also took into account the time period and location of the drama.

In Kirke Mechem's four operas, his musical language is influenced not only by the individual texts being set, as in his other choral works, but also by the time and place being depicted in each opera:

- *Tartuffe* (set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Paris)
- *John Brown* (19<sup>th</sup> century America)
- *The Rivals* (turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century Newport, RI)
- *Pride and Prejudice* (turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century England)

For instance, in *John Brown*, he was inspired by early American folk music and spirituals. For *Tartuffe*, Mechem draws upon the commedia dell'arte spirit that was an influence for playwright Moliere, and the opera buffa style that would follow. *The Rivals* draws upon the idiom of early American Musicals, as this opera is set in Newport, RI at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mechem includes many dances that are based on the English/European musical style dating from the era of Jane Austen's book. Of course, he brings his own voice to each opera, as all are intended for audiences of today.<sup>73</sup>

"Blow Ye the Trumpet", a choral piece from *John Brown*, is an original setting of the hymn text most beloved by John Brown. Unable to confirm the actual hymn tune that Brown would have known and loved, Mechem decided to write his own melody. He said, "none of the existing hymn tunes seemed to me to do justice to these words,... so I gave them a new melody in the style of early American folk music."<sup>74</sup> The tonal

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<sup>73</sup> "Opera", Kirke Mechem—Composer.

<sup>74</sup> Kirke Mechem, "Blow Ye the Trumpet," for SATB Chorus and Piano (New York: G. Schirmer, 1991), 2.

language in this choral anthem aptly represents the time and place of the drama on the stage.

By choosing to draw upon past musical styles in his operas, Mechem has received some criticism that he is “writing down” to the public. In his book, he stated:

I usually reply, ‘No, I’m writing *up* to a public that loves Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, and Gershwin as much as I do. If, in my own language, I can satisfy *that* audience, I have achieved something far more difficult and important than trying to reinvent music.’<sup>75</sup>

### **Mechem’s Compositional Process**

As suggested by the above quote, Mechem’s approach to writing music has been to picture himself in the audience. He explains that he says to himself, “Would I like this?” His desire to uplift, move, and entertain his audience is a driving force. His belief that music is a language, and his desire to use that language to communicate effectively with the listener are the foundational principles of his compositional process. Mechem says, “If I can satisfy them and make them feel all that I feel when I’m composing, then I’ve succeeded. I don’t have to reinvent music. It will be me—it won’t be anybody else—it will sound like my music. (I hope!)”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 125.

<sup>76</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

### Chapter 3: Communication through Verbal Language

Discussing communication, Kirke Mechem stated the obvious: “Both the speaker and listener must speak the same language.”<sup>77</sup> For Mechem, this principle has influenced not only his musical language but his use of verbal language as well. Most prominently, his selection of English texts for the vast majority of his choral works shows his desire to speak in the language of the listener. In a literal sense, Mechem’s desire to communicate with his audience through his choral and vocal works has guided both his selection of texts and his manner of setting them.

#### **Selection of Text**

Perhaps the most important step for Mechem in the composition of choral music is the selection of texts. He has written and spoken extensively on the subject. He has rarely accepted a commission unless he has had input into the text that would be set.<sup>78</sup> Since texts determine so much about Mechem’s compositions (their mood, tonal language, and structure), selecting a text is not a task that is taken lightly. In his 2003 article in the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Sharon Hansen, “Songs of My Old Age and the Lost Art of Storytelling,” *Choral Journal* 57, no. 4 (November 2016), 10.

*Choral Journal*, "The Text Trap", Mechem states, "Our first real task is to choose the poem."<sup>79</sup>

In selecting a poem or text, Mechem is looking for a text that invites musical translation. For him, a text must have a quality of natural expression that a singer could sing from the heart. He avoids texts that are overly dense or intellectual, preferring simple and straightforward language. He states:

Singing should be a natural process. The singer should feel that he is expressing something from the innermost part of himself in forceful, direct language with the same words he would speak. Also important, of course, is that the imagery, the poetic quality, must seem to invite music...I have set dark texts, I've set poems that are poignant, sad, or profound, but even there they must have the force of natural, direct expression.<sup>80</sup>

Mechem often selects shorter poems, so that he can build in more repetition and create unity within the formal structure. He has typically avoided setting well-known sacred texts, although he has noted that their familiarity allows composers to successfully write musically dominated settings, with the text being of secondary importance.<sup>81</sup> Instead, Mechem is most drawn to secular poetry, which is "varied, full of character, and modern in its sensibilities, whether spiritual or worldly."<sup>82</sup>

Although the composer has set a wide array of texts, it is observed that the composer has most often selected texts that are humorous, texts about music and

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<sup>79</sup> Kirke Mechem, "The Text Trap," *Choral Journal* 44, no. 4 (November 2003), 24.

<sup>80</sup> Guelker-Cone, "Kirke Mechem--An Interview," 21.

<sup>81</sup> Mechem, "The Text Trap," 23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



singing, and texts about social justice and peace. Pieces in these categories are listed in Appendix A.

### **Intelligibility of Text**

As he has primarily written for an English-speaking audience, Mechem has almost exclusively set English texts. The only exceptions to this are a few of his sacred works that use standard church Latin and *Im Lande des Morgensterns*, a choral cycle he wrote in Vienna. Mechem wants the audience to understand the text that he so carefully selected and set to music. Singer's diction is therefore very important to him as well. When working with opera singers before they perform his operas, he often compares diction with stage makeup. He explains that close up, stage makeup looks "ridiculous," but for the audience, it looks natural. Likewise, singing with good diction may feel very overdone to the singer, but for the audience, it makes the text intelligible. He jokes, "No one has ever come from an opera performance with the complaint, 'Oh, it was very nice, but they really pronounced the words too clearly!'"<sup>83</sup> To further press the point, he has a long-standing offer for opera singers in his operas: if any of them receive a review that compliments their diction, he will take them and a guest of their choice out to dinner in San Francisco. (So far, only 2 singers have had the opportunity to take him up on this offer.)

Mechem's manner of setting texts also aids in comprehension. The natural flow and intonation of the spoken text are very apparent in Mechem's vocal and choral

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<sup>83</sup> Mechem, interview with Hannah Williams.

music. Mechem's characteristic flexibility of rhythm and meter allow this to happen, with proper text stress always being in the forefront. Mechem's setting of Thomas Nash's "Spring" in *Five Centuries of Spring*, uses flexibility of meter to bring out natural text rhythms. Freely moving between spritely 3/4 and 2/4 meters, the text seems to jump off the page (Fig. 3-1).

Thomas Nash 1593      Kirke Mechem Opus 24

**Allegro**  $\text{♩} = 72$  ( $\text{♩} = 108$ ;  $\text{♩} - \text{♩}$  *sempre*)

*mf*

Soprano  
Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleas - - ant

Alto  
Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleas - - ant

Tenor  
Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleas - ant

Bass  
Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleas - - ant

**Allegro**  $\text{♩} = 72$  ( $\text{♩} = 108$ ;  $\text{♩} - \text{♩}$  *sempre*)

Piano (only for rehearsal)

king; Then blooms each thing, maids

*poco marc.*

king, the sweet Spring, the sweet Spring; blooms each thing,

*poco marc.*

king; Then blooms each thing in the Spring, the sweet Spring;

*poco marc.*

king; Then blooms, then blooms each thing in the

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The image displays a musical score for Kirke Mechem's "Spring (Nash)". It consists of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes dynamic markings such as *cresc.*, *poco marcato*, and *f*. The lyrics are: "dance in a ring, in the Spring, the maids dance in a then the maids dance, dance, dance in a then maids dance in a ring, in the Spring, dance in a Spring, the sweet Spring, then maids dance in a". The piano accompaniment provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "ring, Cold doth not sting, in the Spring, pret - - ty", "ring, Cold doth not sting, in the Spring, pret - - tv", "ring, Cold doth not sting, in the Spring, pret-ty birds", and "ring, Cold doth not sting, in the Spring, the pret - - ty". The piano accompaniment continues with chords and melodic fragments. The score is written in 2/4 time and uses a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Figure 3.1. Text stress in Kirke Mechem, "Spring (Nash)," Op. 24, No. 1, pp. 4-5 (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser Co., 1968).

In setting the contrasting Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, "Spring," he uses a chant-like quasi-recitative that carries the speech rhythm and moves with a contour that mirrors

the intonation of the spoken text to express the intense language of her poetry. He flows between triple and duple rhythms to allow for this apt musical setting (Fig. 2.2).

It is noteworthy that Mechem doesn't shy away from writing in a contrapuntal style, but commonly alternates between homophonic and contrapuntal sections. The former allows for ease in comprehension, while the latter has clear points of imitation, allowing the text to be understood through repetition. This alternation of texture is clearly shown in "Loveliest of Trees" (Fig. 2.1).

### **Textual and Musical Form**

In order to most effectively communicate texts in his compositions, Mechem carefully studies the poem to understand both its outer structure and its "psychological structure."<sup>84</sup> Mechem studies the "psychological structure" by observing climaxes, moments of repose, suspense, tension, changes of mood, or a return to a previous mood. Mechem strives to depict both the outer and inner structure of the text while insuring that there is an overall unity to the setting.

In his setting of "Blow Ye The Trumpet," Mechem takes the one hymn stanza that he chose for the setting and creates an ABA form musically. This allows for the unity that he values in his settings. In order to do this, he repeats the first line of text at the beginning of the return of theme A, inserting the text into the hymn as follows\*:

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

Table 3.1. Text and tempos in “Blow Ye the Trumpet”

Blow ye the trumpet, blow.	A (slow cut time)
Sweet is Thy work, my God, my King.	
I’ll praise my Maker with all my breath.	B (6/4 <i>piu mosso</i> , <i>piu forte</i> )
O happy is the man who hears.	
Why should we start, and fear to die,	
With songs and honors sounding loud.	
(*Blow ye the trumpet, blow.)	A (slow cut time, softer)
Ah, lovely appearance of death.	

In Mechem’s emotive setting of this text for the opera *John Brown*, he depicts the psychological structure by using contrasting meters and tempos in the A and B sections. The A section is in a slow cut-time, and the B section is in a stirring 6/4 time, *poco piu animato*. At the return of A, he shows the starkness of the final lines of text by using a softer dynamic than the opening lines. Further, Mechem brings out the psychological structure by using this form on a macro level, with the entire stanza repeating three times. The middle section, however, is abridged, and like the B section of the stanza, is *piu mosso* and *piu forte*, with a more contrapuntal setting than the opening and closing iterations.

On a large scale, Mechem uses the formal structure of the music (a large A B A) as a way to express the psychological structure of the text, which can be seen as Mechem’s depiction of John Brown’s own psychological state. One way to describe this psychological journey which Mechem depicts in his music (on a micro and macro level) is “Anticipation,” “Agitation”, and “Acceptance.”

Table 3.2. Macro and micro form within “Blow Ye the Trumpet”

A			B		A		
Anticipation			Agitation		Acceptance		
A	B	A	A'	B'	A	B	A

  

Words from a traditional hymn,  
adapted by K.M. Kirke Mechem  
Op. 51, b2

**Adagio, rather freely** ♩ = ca. 69 *p poco cresc.*

Soprano Blow ye the trum - pet,

Alto *p poco cresc.*  
Blow ye the trum - pet,

Tenor *p poco cresc.*  
Blow ye the trum - pet,

Bass Blow ye the trum - pet,

  

**Adagio, rather freely** ♩ = ca. 69

Piano or Organ *f* *mf* *p* *mp*

  

*poco rall.*

*f* *mp* *pp*

Blow, \_\_\_ blow, \_\_\_ Sweet is Thy work, \_\_\_ my \_\_\_

*f* *mp* *pp*

Blow, \_\_\_ blow, \_\_\_ Sweet is Thy work, \_\_\_ my

*f* *mp*

Blow, \_\_\_ blow, \_\_\_

*f* *mp*

Blow, \_\_\_ blow, \_\_\_

  

*poco rall.*

*f* *mp* *ppp*

1  
Poco più animato (ma non troppo)

God, my King. O—

God, my King. O—

*mp* *cresc. poco a poco* *f*

I'll praise my Mak - er with all my breath. O—

*mp* *cresc. poco a poco* *f*

I'll praise my Mak - er with all my breath. O—

Poco più animato (ma non troppo)

hap - py the man who hears. ———

hap - py the man who hears. ———

*mp* *cresc. poco a poco*

hap - py the man who hears. ——— Why should we start and

*mp* *cresc. poco a poco*

hap - py the man who hears. ——— Why should we start and

*f* *poco arpegg.* *p* *poco arpegg.*

Figure 3.2. Textual and musical form in Kirke Mechem, “Blow Ye the Trumpet,” Op. 51, b2, pp. 3-4 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1991).

Looking at a contrasting work of the composer through the same lens, the piece “You Say There is No Love,” an SSAA piece from the cycle *The Winged Joy*, also shows Mechem’s intentional setting of text to convey the inner and outer formal structure of a poem. The text by poet Grace Fallow Norton is as follows<sup>85</sup>:

Table 3.3. Text and textual inserts in “You Say There is No Love”

You say there is no love, my love, Unless it lasts for aye! Oh, folly, there are interludes (Mechem inserts “fa la la’s”) Better than the play.
You say lest it endure, sweet love, It is not love for aye? Oh blind! Eternity can be (Mechem inserts “folly” and “fa la la’s”) All in one little day.

This text already has within it a formal structure, with two stanzas containing a question and answer-type structure within them. Mechem brings out that structure in his setting: the viewpoint of the lover is set in an incessant repeating eighth note pattern, and the viewpoint of the poet is depicted with rhythmic and tonal variety. Additionally, Mechem chose to add bits of text to more successfully bring out the psychological structure of the poem, which emphasizes the viewpoint of the poet, and her judgement of her lover. The added “fa la las” (derived from the word “folly”) help to depict the carefree reply of the poet to her more serious love.

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<sup>85</sup> Kirke Mechem, “You Say There is No Love,” SSAA Chorus and Piano (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1968), 2.



say lest it en - dure, sweet love, It is not love, You say lest it en -

say lest it en - dure, sweet love, It is not love, You say lest it en -

say lest it en - dure, sweet love, It is not love, You say lest it en -

say lest it en - dure, sweet love, It is not love, You say lest it en -

*loco* *sfz* *sfz*

*cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.*

dure, sweet love, It is not love for aye? Oh

dure, sweet love, It is not love for aye? Oh

dure, sweet love, It is not love for aye? Oh

dure, sweet love, It is not love for aye? Oh

*f* *(unite) cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.*

50 *ff* *cresc. poco a poco*  
*mf poco marcato*

blind, blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, oh, fol-ly, fol-ly,

blind, blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, fol-ly, Fa la la, fa la la la la, Fa la

blind, blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, Fa la la, fa la la la la,

blind, blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, fol-ly, Fa la la, fa la la la la—

50 *ff* *mp* *cresc. poco a poco*

blind, blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, fol-ly, Fa la la, fa la la la la—

55 *p subito*

blind, fol-ly, fol-ly, fol-ly! E - ter - ni - ty—

la la, Fa la la, fa la la, fol-ly, fol-ly! E - ter - ni - ty—

Fa la la, fa la la la la, fol-ly, fol-ly! E - ter - ni - ty—

— la, Fa la la, fa la la, fol-ly, fol-ly! E - ter - ni - ty—

55 *p subito*

*Ped.*

Figure 3.3. Textual and musical form in Kirke Mechem, “You Say There is No Love,” Op. 22, No. 7, pp. 10-11 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1968).

In the second stanza, Mechem chooses to bring the word “folly” from the first stanza into the same moment, as well as “fa la la’s”, to reinforce the overall unity of the piece.

In both of these examples, Mechem has taken some liberties with the poetry in order to convey the poems' essence, and, at the same time, create a work of musical unity. Mechem has never shied away from adapting his text sources. He stated, "We choral composers must also exercise dramatic control over our texts. We must not allow them to bully us into slavish obedience."<sup>86</sup> In his article, "The Text Trap," he also reminds choral composers that they need not simply use the technique of word painting, moving from phrase to phrase in a disconnected way, but rather, using all musical devices available to them, (which he lists as "melodic and motivic invention, development, repetition, variation, suspense, climax, contrast, unity, and variety"<sup>87</sup>), to communicate the poetry to the audience effectively in a musical language. As stated by Sharon Hansen in her 2016 article in the *Choral Journal*, Mechem shows a "meticulous attention to text and its marriage to music."<sup>88</sup> In the end, Mechem states, "the piece will be judged by the beauty and the character and the originality of its melodies and harmonies, and by the skill of the poem's translation to the choral medium."<sup>89</sup>

### **Translation of Texts**

Communication through the verbal element of his vocal and choral works is incredibly important to Mechem. When his opera *Tartuffe* was performed internationally, he encouraged it to be sung in the vernacular of the audiences. It was translated with the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Hansen, "Songs of My Old Age," 10.

<sup>89</sup> Mechem, "The Text Trap," 12.

blessing of the composer both into German and Russian for performances in those countries. In his 1970 article in the *Choral Journal* on “The Choral Cycle,” he encouraged American conductors to perform pieces in English so that the audience could follow the story. He explained that, especially for humorous pieces, it is important for the piece to be sung in the language of the audience so that the humor can be understood in real time. If conductors still chose to perform a piece in its original language, Mechem encouraged them to provide the audience an excellent side-by-side translation, so they could follow along as successfully as possible.<sup>90</sup> When Mechem has set texts that were originally in other languages, he has used English translations for his compositions, often translating them himself. Two examples are his settings of Hildegard von Bingen texts, adapted and translated by Mechem, in “Green Music,” and his choral cycle, *In the Land of Morgenstern*, a cycle of humorous German poems by Christian Morgenstern that Mechem set to his own English translation as well as the poet’s original German (allowing German or English-speaking choirs to sing in their vernacular).

Mechem came to his appreciation of music sung in the vernacular through personal experience. During his time in Vienna in the late 1950’s, he and his wife would often attend the Vienna Opera, which was at that time an “ensemble company.” As such, they performed all operas in German. Here, then, was a case where the performers and audience spoke the same language. Mechem and his wife had learned German well enough that they were in on the experience as well. “It was a revelation,” he recalls. “Everyone laughed at the jokes and enjoyed all the stage business; there

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<sup>90</sup> Kirke Mechem, “The Choral Cycle,” *Choral Journal* (April 1970): 8–11.

were no supertitles to watch. I finally understood what opera was all about.”<sup>91</sup> Having grown up to see opera as a very serious and formal affair, Mechem compared the way the Viennese enjoyed a Mozart opera performed in German to Americans having fun at a baseball game in the United States. “It was an absolute delight.”<sup>92</sup> It is no wonder that Mechem would want the same connection with his audiences as he wrote choral works and his own operas in the years to come.

### **Composer as Poet**

Although he has set the words of countless poets, including many poems of his father, Mechem has often chosen to write his own texts in order that he can communicate exactly what he wants to say or what is needed for the occasion. Most often, these texts are from his humorous works. It is also common for Mechem to indicate, “Adapted freely by the composer” under the text source. When setting texts from the Bible, Mechem often freely adapts different passages of scripture to create a text that lends itself to a unified musical setting. Perhaps it is due to his background and talents as a writer that the composer is not averse to creating his own texts or adapting texts as needed. Lists of choral works with texts written by or adapted by the composer, are in Appendix B. Interestingly, humorous texts are more often written by Mechem, and sacred texts are more often adapted by him. It is also noteworthy that he has

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<sup>91</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 39.

<sup>92</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

written his own librettos for all four of his operas (to be discussed more in Chapter Four).

Mechem's skill and ease with the written word has allowed the composer throughout his career to adapt or create texts that are suited to the music he wanted to write at a given time, and that were exactly what he wanted to communicate to the listener. For Mechem, texts are not a wallpaper to hang his compositional sound upon, but the main focus of his lyric compositions, and the driving force of his musical language. Mechem scholar, Donald Miller, asserts, "Mechem's brilliance in text setting cannot be overemphasized."<sup>93</sup>

Mechem clearly has a desire to communicate through both verbal and musical language. His selection, creation, or adaptation of text; his study and expression of the text's external and internal form; and his care in setting his texts naturally and clearly in the language of their audience all show a composer who wants his audience to understand exactly what he is communicating.

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<sup>93</sup> Miller, "The Choral Music of Kirke Mechem," 2.

## Chapter 4: Communication through Opera

With Mechem's fundamental desire to communicate with his audiences, both through verbal and musical language, it seems inevitable that he would find his way to the most dramatic and communicative of genres: opera. The seed was first planted for him in Vienna. As a young expatriate attending concerts every day, Mechem observed that the Viennese were "rabid opera fans," laughing throughout the opera and having a great time. "I finally got it! This was the best entertainment ever. It was like musical comedy, only the music was so much better! It was an absolute delight."<sup>94</sup> He entertained the thought of writing an opera, but didn't feel he could do it yet.

### Expansion of Choral Forms

As he continued in his career, Mechem began to slowly work his way towards opera by writing in more expanded choral forms. First, he became a proponent of the choral cycle, creating cycles of choral pieces that were unified, thematically related, and organized for a dramatic continuity.<sup>95</sup> Mechem differentiates the cycle from a suite or collection, which contain more loosely related pieces, often without a dramatic connection. In his choral cycles, Mechem sought to create musical as well as dramatic

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<sup>94</sup> Mechem, interview with Hannah Williams.

<sup>95</sup> Mechem, "The Choral Cycle," 8-9.

continuity, with recurring thematic material and attention to key relationships. Early choral cycles composed by Mechem containing this type of dramatic thread include the following:

Table 4.1 Early choral cycles with thematic and dramatic continuity

*Tourist Time: Five Satirical Choruses, Op. 11 (1957)*

Texts from various poets, with piano

1. Tourist Time
2. Boston
3. Cologne
4. Texas
5. Rome

*Songs of Wisdom, Op. 14 (1958-59)*

Sacred cantata with texts from old testament

With soli SATB, 5 motets preceded by plainsong recitatives

1. The Song of Moses
2. A Love Song
3. The Protest of Job
4. A Song of Comfort
5. A Song of Praise

*The Winds of May, Op. 17 (1950-1960)*

Five poems of Sarah Teasdale, depicting a love story

1. The Tune
2. Let it be Forgotten
3. Over the Roofs
4. I Shall Not Care
5. Song (Love Me With Your Whole Heart)

*The Winged Joy: A Love Story in Seven Parts, Op. 22 (1963-1964)*

Cantata for women's chorus and soprano solo, with piano

Settings of various female poets

1. Love is a Terrible Thing
2. The Message
3. The Cynic
4. A Farewell
5. Love Came Back at Fall o' Dew
6. Red May
7. You Say There is No Love



*Five Centuries of Spring, Op. 24 (1964)*

Settings of poetry about spring, one poet for each century

1. Spring (Nash)
2. From You Have I Been Absent
3. Laughing Song
4. Loveliest of Trees
5. Spring (Millay)

*Seven Joys of Christmas: A Sequence of Carols, Op. 25 (1964)*

*A Sequence of Carols for women's or mixed choir accompanied by harp, piano, or chamber orchestra*

1. This Is the Truth
2. Din Don, Merrily on High
3. Joseph Dearest
4. Patapan
5. New Year's Song
6. Fum, Fum, Fum
7. God Bless The Master (Quodlibet)

*The Children of David: Five Modern Psalms, Op. 37 (1974)*

Cantata for mixed chorus and organ, with mezzo soprano solo

Settings of poets who carried on the tradition of David: "Psalms to the spirit of life, with recurring musical and poetic motifs"

1. Psalm
2. Joy
3. The Song of David
4. Man of My Own People
5. Pied Beauty

Source: "Catalog of Music," Kirke Mechem—Composer,

<https://www.kirkemechem.com/assets/pdf/catalog.pdf>

All of the above choral cycles allowed Mechem to take his listeners on a longer journey and through a range of emotions and ideas. Three of the above examples, *Songs of Wisdom*, *Winging Wildly*, and *The Children of David* included solo sections, bringing Mechem closer to the operatic genre. The alternation in *Songs of Wisdom* between solo recitative and choral motets created a further connective and dramatic

thread to the work. Mechem conceived *Songs of Wisdom* as a “search for the meaning of life.”<sup>96</sup> Completely a cappella, and lasting 33 minutes, Mechem acknowledges that it has not been a “best-seller,” but its performances have been consistently well-reviewed.

As Mechem records in his book, one critic, Charles Susskind, called it :

a mature work, grandly conceived and admirably executed in a wholly original fashion.. that resembles in format nothing so much as opera...the young composer’s irrepressible spirits might well find full expression in a comic opera that.. could become, at long last, *the* American folk opera.<sup>97</sup>

Kirke says regarding that review, “I find it startling that a man I’d never met knew twenty years before I did that I should have been writing operas.”<sup>98</sup>

### **Choral Orchestral Works**

Soon after the performance of his two symphonies in San Francisco, Josef Krips left the symphony and Seiji Ozawa was hired to replace him. Ozawa’s taste in new music favored the avant-garde, and so Mechem’s works were no longer programmed by the orchestra. That, in combination with the realization that symphonies didn’t often program new music unless it was a world premiere (meaning it wouldn’t see successive performances), led Mechem to give up on writing symphonies and shift his energies to writing in other genres for large forces. Turning to choral-orchestral works, an even more expansive genre for chorus, he was getting closer and closer to opera.

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<sup>96</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 46.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

In the 1970's, Mechem composed or revised three large-scale choral/orchestra works: *The King's Contest*, *Singing is So Good a Thing*, and *Speech to a Crowd*.

*The King's Contest: Dramatic Cantata, Op. 42*

This dramatic work tells the ancient story of King Darius, from the apocryphal book of Esdras, who held a contest to determine the strongest force on the earth. For chorus and orchestra, with mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone and bass soloists, it was written between 1961 and 1962 and revised and orchestrated in 1972. In the story, three contestants propose the following contestants for the king's contest: "Wine" (sung by the baritone), "The King" (sung by the bass), and "Women" (sung by the tenor). With a chorus acting as jury and a mezzo-soprano acting as narrator, the contest is won by the tenor. He then declares that a stronger power than all three is "truth."<sup>99</sup> At 33 minutes in length, *The King's Contest* was first performed in its revised form by the San Francisco Civic Chorale and Symphony in the San Francisco Opera House in 1974, conducted by the composer. Mechem's cantata is so dramatic that it can be sung as a one-act opera, and on a few occasions, it has been presented with costumes and staging.<sup>100</sup> Notably, Mechem created the text/libretto himself, an adaptation from the apocrypha.

*Singing is So Good a Thing: An Elizabethan Recreation, Op. 36*

Written between 1970 and 1971, the *Singing is So Good a Thing* was commissioned by the Elgin, IL Choral Union in 1970 for their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Writing

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 93.

for chorus, solo tenor or soprano, and chamber orchestra, Mechem chose to set a text given to him by his mentor, Harold Schmidt, that had long been hanging on the wall of his music studio.<sup>101</sup> The text was penned by English Renaissance composer, William Byrd, and puts forth an itemized list of the benefits of singing. Mechem sets this light-hearted text with a nod to the Renaissance style, using “characteristic melody, rhythm, and harmony.”<sup>102</sup> Likewise, he orchestrated the work for modern instruments that were most like typical Renaissance instruments, and employed traditional Renaissance forms - titling each of twelve movements with the name of their form (such as Canzonet, Ballet, or Catch). Throughout the work, instrumental dances alternate between choral sections. This 26 minute lighthearted work could be seen as hearkening back to the English Masque in its use of chorus, instruments, and dances.

#### *Speech to a Crowd, Op. 44*

Commissioned to write a 15-minute choral orchestral piece by the Music Educators National Conference in 1974, Mechem chose to set the poem, “Speech to a Crowd”, by Archibald MacLeish. Scoring the work for chorus, large orchestra, and baritone solo, he found emotion and variety in the poem, which deals with the question of faith and submits the idea that humanity must solve its own problems. Mechem was bit disillusioned by the tepid response *Speech to a Crowd* received by what he deemed a religiously conservative audience. He determined that audiences seem to expect choral-

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 79-80

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

orchestral concert works to be religious and in Latin<sup>103</sup> (both of which went against his compositional impulses).

### Shifting to Opera

After all his work in writing in expanded choral forms, including dramatic choral cycles and cantatas for choir, soloists, and orchestra, Mechem (having exhausted the creative possibilities for communication within these formats) desired to try his hand at opera, the most expansive and dramatic of musical genres. He stated: “Around the beginning of 1977 I decided to take the plunge: it was time to find out whether I could write a successful opera.”

### Writing *Tartuffe*

Having been given a copy of Moliere’s play by his father as a teen, Mechem had long loved *Tartuffe*. Then, in 1967, he saw a production of the play by the American Conservatory Theater that greatly impacted him. He recalls,

It seemed to me like a comic opera waiting for the music. I looked over my copy of the play and looked for ways to cut and rearrange the scenes for an opera, and went back to another performance. I was not yet ready to write an opera, but I kept my notes for the future.<sup>104</sup>

Ten years later and now in his fifties, Mechem returned to the play, ready to try his hand at opera. Confident in his own abilities as a writer (having written many of his own texts in previous vocal works), he set out to create a libretto based on Moliere’s play. Beginning the process by studying other opera librettos that had been adapted from

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 78.

stage plays, including *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville*, Mechem geared up to write the libretto.<sup>105</sup>

During the process of writing the libretto, which took only three months, Mechem made many decisions based upon his experiences studying and watching operas in the past, his own dramatic and comedic instincts, and his sophisticated understanding of text setting: (1) He created *Tartuffe's* libretto already knowing which texts would be set as a recitatives, arias, duets, or ensembles and wrote in forms that he knew would make dramatic sense; (2) he shifted the roles to assure a balance of female and male parts; (3) he adjusted the language so that it would sound natural to the audience as it was sung; and (4) he assigned different characters specific poetic forms that highlighted their diverse personalities. In this process, Mechem became convinced of the benefits of being his own librettist, as it allowed him the flexibility and freedom to communicate exactly what he wanted and in the manner he chose.<sup>106</sup>

Altogether, it took Mechem three years to complete his first opera. He recalls this experience fondly: "I enjoyed writing it so much—and I can't explain this—I truly felt I knew what I was doing!"<sup>107</sup> He was equally fortunate in securing a premiere for the work. It was premiered by the San Francisco Opera on May 27, 1980, and as Mechem recalls, "the success of *Tartuffe* was immense; it was a turning point in my career."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>107</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

<sup>108</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 105.

*Tartuffe* has been performed over 400 times to date<sup>109</sup>, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In an article on Kirke Mechem in *The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Tartuffe* is a centerpiece:

Exuding a lighthearted 'Falstaffian spirit,' *Tartuffe* shows strong melodic and orchestral invention, skilled ensemble writing and text setting, and clearly drawn characterizations; it abounds in musical jokes, parody, caricature, satire and puns... *Tartuffe* became, in its first decade, one of the most frequently performed full-length American operas.<sup>110</sup>

Having found a genre that fully employed his talents and enabled him to connect with his audience in such a palpable way, Mechem devoted himself to writing operas for the next twenty years. Choral composition took a back seat until his four operas were completed. As with *Tartuffe*, in his next three operas Mechem chose his own subject matter, not seeking or accepting commissions. "When I take on such a formidable project as opera," he says, "I want to pick the subject and work it out in my own way at my own time."<sup>111</sup> For Mechem, a prerequisite for selecting a story was that it contain diverse characters. The only reason to turn a story into an opera, he argues, is for "the opportunity for music to make the characters and their actions come alive in a fuller, more palpable existence."<sup>112</sup> Mechem accomplished this in his operas by giving each character a musical "profile" (similar to Wagner's *leitmotif*), and then using repetition,

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<sup>109</sup> "Operas," Kirke Mechem—Composer, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.kirkemechem.com/operas.html>

<sup>110</sup> Humphrey "Kirke Mechem," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>111</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 111.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

variation, and development to depict the character's growth or change over the course of the work.<sup>113</sup>

Table 4.2 Kirke Mechem's operas

*Tartuffe*

Comic Opera in Three Acts

Based on the French play by Moliere

Music and English Libretto by Kirke Mechem

Composed 1977-1980

Premiered May 27, 1980 by the San Francisco Opera

Duration: 2 hours, 10 minutes

*Synopsis:* Tartuffe, pretending to be a religious figure, tries to con a rich Parisian man into giving him his daughter in marriage and the family fortune. The rest of the characters plot against him to unveil his fraud and set things right.

*Select Review:* "... two hours of sharp, lively opera buffa . . . Mechem wrote a tightened libretto — modern, easily understood and wittily theatrical — and set it to music that is skillful and deftly humorous. The characterizations are masterful."<sup>114</sup>

— *Die Presse (Vienna)*

*John Brown*

Opera in Three Acts

Libretto by Kirke Mechem

(In consultation with John Brown historian, Stephen Oates)

Composed and Revised intermittently between 1980 and 2003

Premiered May 3, 2008 by the Lyric Opera of Kansas City

Duration: 2 hours, 7 minutes

*Synopsis:* John Brown, an abolitionist in Kansas, struggles to end American slavery. His family is tangled in the strife of the era that led up to the civil war. White and black families are separated and relationships severed. Brown is executed at Harper's Ferry and his friend, black leader Frederick Douglass, exclaims, "As long as men love freedom, John Brown will never die."

*Select Review:* "Strikingly contemporary...with its strong score and story, the opera is likely to become a standard in the operatic repertoire. . . . a powerful

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



opera about the terrible stakes in the nation's struggle over slavery. Profound and haunting, it may be as close to an American epic as anything yet written."<sup>115</sup>  
— *National Catholic Reporter*

### *The Rivals*

Comic Opera in Two Acts

Based on (adapted freely) the play by Sheridan

Libretto by Kirke Mechem

Composed intermittently between 1997 and 2005

Premiered September 16, 2011 by the Skylight Opera Theater in Milwaukee, WI

Duration: 1 hour, 50 minutes

*Synopsis:* A rich British naval captain (Jack) falls in love with an American heiress. She has a fantasy of marrying a penniless artist and living a simple life, so rejects him. He returns, disguised as a poor composer (Waverly), and she falls in love. Her parents are in favor of the wealthy Jack, of course, so he finds himself a rival to his own alter-ego.

*Select Review:* "Buoyant melodies, supple harmonies and perky rhythms. In spirit, 'The Rivals' harks back to Rossini and Donizetti; in sound, it weds Puccini's generous lyricism to the dancing meters of Bernstein's 'Candide.' . . . the libretto is bright and witty. . . the music unfailingly suits the words with elegant ensembles and sly allusions."<sup>116</sup>

— *New York Times*

### *Pride and Prejudice*

Opera in Two Acts

Based on the novel by Jane Austen

Libretto by Kirke Mechem

Composed intermittently between 2004 and 2019

Concert Premiere: April 6, 2019 by the Redwood Symphony

Duration: 2 hours, 16 minutes

*Synopsis:* Mr. Bingley, new to the Netherfield country estate, finds himself attracted to Jane, oldest daughter in the Bennet family. Her younger sister, Elizabeth, is repulsed by the pride of his even wealthier friend, Darcy. Elizabeth and Darcy find themselves at odds until they realize they have feelings for each other, masked by their pride and prejudice. The couples are united when all is forgiven.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

*Select Review:* “. . . full of strong and distinctive characters, it has an appealing and emotion-laden plot that’s enhanced by underlining it with music; it’s full of dance and spectacle. This is the very stuff of opera. [Mechem’s] libretto is ingeniously written, often using Austen’s own words and filling in gaps intelligently. [His] music is not only attractive, it’s busy and evocative. Vocal lines often reveal character, as with Mrs. Bennet erupting in peals of ornamental notes at words she wishes to emphasize. The orchestra . . . is an active participant in the plot. Dances at house balls enliven Act I, catching up the vocal lines into [their] lively rhythms. . . . Both composition and performance were a real treat.”<sup>117</sup>

— *Daily Journal, San Mateo CA*

*Source:* “Opera,” Kirke Mechem—Composer, accessed June 3, 2019.  
<https://www.kirkemechem.com/operas.html>

### **Mechem’s Views on Opera Today**

As Kirke Mechem found his latter three operas difficult to launch and be produced by American opera companies, and even *Tartuffe*’s relative scarcity of performances by major companies, he grew frustrated with the large disparity between the clear success of his operas (with both audiences and critics) and the resistance by opera impresarios and artistic directors to program them. Mechem’s belief in composing for his audience and communicating effectively with them was at odds with many opera companies’ desire to program only the avant-garde. Mechem felt that many of these modern operas failed to connect with their audience and to truly communicate effectively.

There seems to be an overwhelming will-to-fail. Impressing one’s colleagues or critics with a mission for progress, for cutting edge, for relevance has made them forget why people love the operas they do: great universal stories, melody, humor, beauty, truth, humanity!<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

## Songs of the Slave

While waiting over a decade for *John Brown* to receive its first performance, Mechem was encouraged when a consortium of choral and orchestral groups in Southern California commissioned him to form a five-movement suite from the opera. Mechem called it *Songs of the Slave*. For chorus, orchestra, and baritone and soprano soloists, *Songs of the Slave* has been performed over 100 times, beloved by both performers and audiences. Mechem recalls, “It’s warm reception encouraged me not to give up on the opera.”<sup>119</sup>

## An Apex of a Career

Certainly for Mechem, opera represents his grandest achievement as a composer. Acting as librettist and composer in large-scale dramatic works allowed him to reach his audience in a way that was not possible in another genre. In spite of his challenges in getting his operas produced, Mechem believes that they will be his greatest legacy.

I do believe that my operas will enter the repertoire. Because I’ve seen how audiences respond to them. Where I want the listeners to laugh they do laugh, where I want tears to flow they do flow. Because I experienced those emotions when I composed the music. I feel that all I’ve learned, all I’ve experienced, everything that happened in my life has focused, has gone into my work, and it makes me happy.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Kirke Mechem, “John Brown: Evolution of An Opera,” *New Music USA: New Music Box*, June 4, 2008, accessed February 21, 2019. <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/john-brown-evolution-of-an-opera/>.

<sup>120</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

In looking back on his career, Mechem can see the progression that led him to opera, as he developed his skills as a composer and a librettist throughout the decades preceding his work as an opera composer.

In hindsight, it seems to me that my earlier compositions---songs, works for chorus, and orchestra and chamber ensembles—were all a preparation for writing opera. I do not expect to be remembered for my symphonies or chamber music, but have reason to hope that my four operas will find a place in the repertoire, as have many of my choral works.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 145.

## Chapter 5: Mechem's Personality Communicated through His Music

In his contribution to the book, *Composers on Composing for Choir*, edited by Tom Wine, Mechem explained that there are five basic things good composers need that no one can teach:<sup>122</sup>

1. Creativity
2. Their own musical personality
3. Their own character
4. Their own taste
5. Their own special interests and unique points of view

From this list it is clear that for Kirke Mechem, individuality and personality play a large role in composition. Developing his own voice as a composer involved not only his musical skill, but his overall being: his personality, his roots, and his beliefs. This identity can be traced throughout Mechem's career, his large output showing different strands of his character. Through the subject matter of texts he selected and created, and the musical language he used to express them, Mechem communicates very personally with his audience.

Aspects of Mechem's identity that can be found in his works are his Kansas roots, the spiritual views he inherited from his parents, his value of justice and

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<sup>122</sup> Tom Wine, ed., *Composers on Composing for Choir* (GIA Publications, 2007), 21.

integrity, his sense of humor and capacity for wit, his underlying optimism, and his love of music.

### Kansas Roots

Born and raised in Kansas, Mechem found himself turning to his roots in his selection of texts. In his early years he often set the poetry of his father, Kirke F. Mechem, a native Kansan. It was upon his father's play, *John Brown* (about the Kansan abolitionist), that Mechem based his own opera libretto. He had formed a strong connection to the story which had been written and broadcast on the radio during his youth. When first considering writing an opera, it was his first thought for a subject.<sup>123</sup>

Later in his career, upon receiving a commission from the Topeka Symphony, Mechem decided to write about a Kansan subject, the Jayhawk, a mythical bird associated with the state. Mechem explained, "It is an irreverent but sentimental bird with magic powers of transformation and disguise."<sup>124</sup> His work for orchestra, *The Jayhawk: Magic Bird Overture*, Op. 43, is his most popular orchestral work to date. Mechem's music incorporate aspects of the Jayhawk: transformation, humor, and even a quote of a college cheer used at University of Kansas sports events.

In a very recent choral piece, "Daybreak in Alabama," Mechem set a text of Langston Hughes. Mechem has long felt a connection to Hughes, who was also raised in Kansas. This poem touches upon many of the composer's loves: music, composing, and

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<sup>123</sup> Mechem, "John Brown."

<sup>124</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 93.

social justice. Mechem says about the piece, “Disguised as the simple dream of a child, it is a moving metaphor for Hughes’ profound wish for justice and equality.”<sup>125</sup>

### **The Question of Religion**

Growing up in Kansas, Mechem’s father was an atheist, and his mother was a devout Presbyterian. Absorbing these two influences, Mechem had an “unconscious leaning toward the beliefs of his mother,” and a “more conscious acceptance of his father’s philosophy.”<sup>126</sup> Identifying himself as agnostic, Mechem was more often drawn to secular texts for his choral compositions. However, in some of his larger works he has wrestled with the subject of faith. *Speech to a Crowd* and *The Children of David* are settings of texts that are agnostic in nature. *Songs of Wisdom*, with texts personally selected from the Old Testament, represent Mechem’s “search for the meaning of life.”<sup>127</sup> Other times, in fulfilling commissions for sacred works and in a desire to be authentic in his communication, Mechem has chosen to write about universal truths or has used texts about praising God through music and singing.

In one of his most recent choral works, “Great is the Truth”, written for the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Francisco, Mechem uses a Baroque textural style to express a timeless truth. Mechem recounts, “In looking through the Old Testament for a choral text on Truth, I found some relevant words of wisdom that have shocking

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>126</sup> Miller, “The Choral Music of Kirke Mechem,” 2.

<sup>127</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 46.

currency today.”<sup>128</sup> The second stanza from Mechem’s adaptation from Psalm 49 and the Apocrypha: 1 Esdras is as follows:

They that trusteth in riches, and boast of their wealth,  
Not one of them can redeem his brother.  
A man that understandeth not is like the beasts that perish.<sup>129</sup>  
In another commission, from the Stanford University Memorial Church Choir in

2000, Mechem composed *Missa Brevis*, Op. 68, which he subtitled, “Trinity.” In this work Mechem combines the five traditional mass parts into three movements. In his forward to the piece, he describes his reasoning for combining separate parts of the mass in this manner:

Trinity has the theological meaning of ‘the union of three divine persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one God.’ I call this *Missa Brevis Trinity*...in a still broader sense: the unity of God, Man and Nature. Or put another way, the unity and universality of the human spirit whether expressed in religious, philosophical or personal terms.<sup>130</sup>

It is evident that in his sacred works, Mechem desired to communicate honestly and authentically. A list of select sacred choral works can be found in Appendix A; many of these have texts that are universal in nature.

### **Sense of Justice and Integrity**

The subject of justice, integrity, and peace for all people is a common thread in many of Mechem’s vocal works, both sacred and secular. The texts are a window into his own underlying spiritual beliefs. The very serious and controversial themes of Mechem’s

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<sup>128</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Great is the Truth” for SATB chorus (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2017), 2.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Missa Brevis (‘Trinity’)” for SATB chorus (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2001), 2.



opera, *John Brown*, show that he was not afraid to tackle such subjects in his compositions. The idyllic world described in “Daybreak in Alabama”, where white, black, yellow, and brown hands are “touching everybody with kind fingers”, conveys Mechem’s value of peace and equality.

6  
29 **Ritmo preciso** *mp*

And I'm gon-na put \_\_\_\_\_

*p* White and black peo - ple, white and black hands,

*p* White and black, white and

*p* black and white, black and white,

black and white, black and white,

**Ritmo preciso**

31 *cresc.* *f* *molto rall.*

white hands, black hands, brown hands, yel-low \_\_\_\_\_

*cresc.* *molto rall. f*

white and black hands, white and brown, yel-low \_\_\_\_\_

*cresc.* *molto rall. f*

black hands, white and brown hands, yel-low \_\_\_\_\_

*cresc.* *f* *molto rall.*

black and white, brown and yel-low \_\_\_\_\_

*cresc.* *molto rall.*

black and white, brown and white, \_\_\_\_\_

*molto rall.*

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It features a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Ritmo preciso' (precise rhythm). The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 29-30) includes a vocal line starting with 'And I'm gon-na put' and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 31-32) continues the vocal line with the lyrics 'white hands, black hands, brown hands, yel-low' and the piano accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, *cresc.*, *f*, and *molto rall.* The lyrics describe a scene of peace and equality where hands of different colors are touching.

33 *pp* *Lento* *p dolce* 7

hands \_\_\_\_\_ with kind \_\_\_\_\_

*pp* *pp dolce*

hands \_\_\_\_\_ Touch-ing eve - ry - bod - y, \_\_\_\_\_

*pp* *pp dolce*

hands \_\_\_\_\_ Touch-ing eve - ry - bod - y, \_\_\_\_\_

*pp* *pp dolce*

hands \_\_\_\_\_ Touch-ing eve - ry bod - y, \_\_\_\_\_

*mp* 3

And red \_\_\_\_\_ clay earth hands in it

*Lento*

38 *Largamente* ♩ = ca. 56

fin-gers

*p* 3 *p espr.*

touch-ing each oth-er nat-'ral as dew \_\_\_\_\_ In that dawn, \_\_\_\_\_

*p* 3 *p espr.*

touch-ing each oth-er nat-'ral as dew \_\_\_\_\_ In that

*p* 3

touch-ing each oth-er nat-'ral as dew \_\_\_\_\_

*Largamente* ♩ = ca. 56

Figure 5.1. Langston Hughes and Kirke Mechem, “Daybreak in Alabama,” Op. 79, No. 2, pp. 6-7 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2012).

In addition, Mechem's "Island in Space" and "Las Americas Unidas" were directly related to the "Beyond War" movement, their texts mirroring Mechem's own beliefs. The Beyond War movement was centered in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1980's, and Mechem's wife, Donata, was active in the movement. The tenets of this movement were that "war is obsolete," "we are one interdependent whole", and "the means are the ends." The principles espoused by this movement included non-violence and maintaining a spirit of good will towards all.<sup>131</sup> Mechem supported his wife in her participation, and was inspired by many of the principles.

#### "Las Américas Unidas" (1986)

Written for a multi-country live broadcast through an international satellite "spacebridge," this piece was conducted by Mechem and broadcast live via satellite to audiences in North, Central, and South America. The event was called "Spacebridge of the Americas" and celebrated the Beyond War Movement.<sup>132</sup> Mechem's piece, "Las Américas Unidas," included a bilingual text, with the English text being sung by an SATB choir and the Spanish text being sung by a boy's choir and soprano soloist. Aligning with Mechem's value of text intelligibility, the two texts interplay in a call and response manner so that everyone watching the broadcast could understand the words.

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<sup>131</sup> "Beyond War Legacy," Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, accessed May 27, 2019. <https://www.wagingpeace.org/issues/peace/beyond-war-legacy/>.

<sup>132</sup> "Beyond War Award—1986—The Contadora Group," Beyond War Foundation, accessed May 30, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/BeyondWarAward-1986-TheContadoraGroup>.

Child.  
Ch. je - mos, *mf* vi - a - je - mos

Sop. *mp* Let us trav - el,

Alto *mp* Let us trav - el,

Ten. *mp* Let us trav - el,

Bass *mp* Let us trav - el,

Glk. *mf*

Pno. *mf*

Solo

Child.  
Ch. jun - tos *f* a un fu -

Sop. *mf* let us trav - el to - geth - er

Alto *mf* let us trav - el to - geth - er

Ten. *mf* let us trav - el to - geth - er

Bass *mf* let us trav - el to - geth - er

Glk. *f*

Pno. *f*

Child. Ch. *mf* *poco dim.*  
tu - ro más al - lá de la

Sop. *f*  
to a fu - ture,

Alto *f*  
to a fu - ture,

Ten. *f*  
to a fu - ture,

Bass *f*  
to a fu - ture,

Glk. *mf* *dim.*

Pno. *mf* *poco dim.*

Solo 15

Child. Ch. *mp*  
guer - ra. Vi - a - je - mos,

Sop. *mf* *mp*  
to a fu - ture be - yond war. Let us

Alto *mf* *mp*  
to a fu - ture be - yond war. Let us

Ten. *mf* *mp*  
to a fu - ture be - yond war. Let us

Bass *mf* *mp*  
to a fu - ture be - yond war. Let us

Glk. *mf*

Pno. *mf* *mp*

Figure 5.2. Bilingual social justice text in Kirke Mechem, “Las Américas Unidas,” Op. 53, pp. 20-21 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986).

Before the performance of the work, the Spanish text was read while the English text was displayed on the screen. Both English and Spanish texts were adapted from Beyond War Foundation sources. The English version of the text is as follows:

Let us travel together to a future beyond war.  
The soul of humanity is one.  
We are united by the sun, by the water, by the air, by the earth.  
Let us travel together to a future beyond war.  
The rivers of hope and justice are born in the heart.  
United, all nations together shall reach the ocean of peace.  
Let us travel together to a future beyond war.  
The soul of humanity is one.<sup>133</sup>

#### “Island in Space”(1990)

Also espousing Beyond-War ideas, this piece was written for the occasion of the California State University (Chico) Choir’s tour to the Soviet Union and Poland in 1990. Written amidst the ending of the cold war, “Island in Space” speaks of the desire for world peace. Mechem combines the traditional *dona nobis pacem* with the words of astronaut Russell Schweikart and part of a poem by Archibald MacLeish. Both texts describe Earth as it looks from a distance, “so beautiful, so small, and so fragile”, and how we should “see ourselves as riders on the Earth together.”<sup>134</sup> Dr. Sharon Paul, who led the choir on their tour, recounted that when the choir performed the work in Warsaw, “there was not a dry eye in either the chorus or the audience.” Mechem stated in his book, “these words have the same effect on me.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Las Américas Unidas” for Mixed Chorus, Soprano Solo and Piano (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986).

<sup>134</sup> Kirke Mechem, “Island in Space” for SATB chorus (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1990).

<sup>135</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 114.

## Wit and Humor

As noted in Grove Music Online, Kirke Mechem's musical style is often characterized by wit and humor. Many of his choral and operatic works are based on humorous texts and display this key element to Mechem's personality. Growing up, Mechem remembers himself as "a ham," writing and acting in school skits, imitating dialects, and cracking jokes.<sup>136</sup> Always quick-witted, Mechem can find humor in many situations and in his daily interactions, enjoying a clever turn of phrase. Introduced by his wife to the often humorous choral genre of catches and canons (meant to be sung informally by friends), Mechem wrote dozens of them, often quickly penning them "anywhere an occasion presented itself."<sup>137</sup> They were later organized into two collections: *Epigrams and Epitaphs*, Op. 13, and *Catch 22 (and Other Catches and Canons)*, Op. 50. About these collections, Mechem says, "I have great fun writing these little puzzles that circulate from singer to singer—it's like telling an intricate joke—though some do have serious texts."<sup>138</sup>

A particularly witty example is "Catch 22." The final piece in his collection of catches, Mechem wrote the text, which tells the story of a tourist trying to catch a cable car, number 22. As explained by Roger MacNeill, "In this instance, Mechem has made not only a double but a quadruple entendre (the title of the novel, the title of the catch, the number of the cable car, and the act of 'catching' the cable car)."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> MacNeill, "Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950," 227.

<sup>137</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 64.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>139</sup> MacNeill, "Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950," 227.

A later set of rounds that also work as a choral cycle are *Birthdays: Round Numbers*, Op. 72. Celebrating the ages of 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, and 70, this cycle abounds in humor, laughing a little at each age. Mechem's hilarious, often original texts are set in a lively yet straight-forward manner, which makes for a very funny deadpan delivery. In the text for movement four ("Forty Notes for Forty Years"), Mechem writes:

The older I grow, the meaner I get. (men)  
Don't tell me, I know, the older you grow. (women)  
Like peanuts and snow, Like gossip and debt, (all)  
The older I grow, The meaner I/you get.<sup>140</sup>

As the title suggests, Mechem sets the text (containing forty syllables) with forty notes, a musical witticism. Mechem's musical setting is in a very stately, and serious G minor (for the deadpan delivery of the humorous text). As the piece continues, Mechem switches to a tight imitative texture with a long *accelerando*, humorously depicting the quickening passage of time as one ages (Fig. 5.3).

In movement six (age 60), the text (an old Quaker proverb) is extremely brief, yet equally funny in its musical setting. "Leave the flurry to the masses; Take your time and shine your glasses."<sup>141</sup> Again, Mechem sets the text in a straight forward way using the technique of word painting. Repeating the words to create a loose ABAB form, he sets the first sentence with a brisk cut time in Bb major, with short phrases punctuated by rests (depicting breathlessness) and quick running eighth notes (depicting the "flurry" of

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<sup>140</sup> Kirke Mechem, "Birthdays: Round Numbers," SATB chorus and piano (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2006), 2.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.



“the masses”). The second sentence quickly shifts to slow note values with a *rallentando*, depicting the text (Fig. 5-4).

The musical score is for a piece titled "BIRTHDAYS". It features vocal parts (Soprano and Alto) and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems, starting at measures 11 and 15 respectively.

**System 1 (Measures 11-14):**

- Vocal Parts:** Both Soprano and Alto sing the lyrics "know, The old - er you grow." in measure 11. In measure 12, they sing "Like pea - nuts and".
- Piano Part:** The piano accompaniment begins in measure 11 with a *p* (piano) dynamic. In measure 12, it features a *sfz* (sforzando) dynamic. In measure 13, it returns to *p*.

**System 2 (Measures 15-18):**

- Vocal Parts:** In measure 15, both parts sing "Like gos - sip and debt," with a *mp* (mezzo-piano) dynamic. In measure 16, they sing "snow,". In measure 17, they sing "The old - er I" with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic. In measure 18, they sing "The old - er I".
- Piano Part:** The piano accompaniment continues with a *cresc. poco a poco* (crescendo poco a poco) marking in measure 15. In measure 17, it features a *mf* dynamic and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking.

BIRTHDAYS

19 *f* *poco più mosso* C

The mean - er you get.

*f* *poco più mosso*

The mean - er you get.

*f* *p* *poco più mosso* add some baritones

grow, The mean - er I get. The fast - er I

*f* *poco più mosso*

grow, The mean - er I get.

*f* *p sub.* *sfz* *poco più mosso* C

24 *accel. poco a poco* *mp* add some altos

The

*p* *accel. e cresc. poco a poco* add some sopranos

The fast - er you go, The slow - er you get. Don't

*accel. e cresc. poco a poco*

go, The slow - er I get. Don't tell me, I know. The

*accel. e cresc. poco a poco* *mp* add some tenors

The fast - er I go, The

*accel. e cresc. poco a poco* *sfz*

BIRTHDAYS

Figure 5.3. Humor in Kirke Mechem, "Forty Notes for Forty Years," from *Birthdays: Round Numbers*, Op. 72, pp. 18-19 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2006).

39

*mf* *f*

Leave the flur - ry, leave the flur - ry To the mass - es.

*mf* *f*

To the mass es, Leave the flur - ry,

*mf* *f*

shine your glass - es, Leave the flur - ry To the

*mf* *f*

- ry To the mass - es. Take your

42

*accel.* *mp cresc. poco a poco*

Leave the flur - ry To the mass - es.

*p accel. e cresc. poco a poco*

leave the flur - ry To the mass - es. Take your

*p accel. e cresc. poco a poco*

mass - es. Leave the flur - ry To the mass - es. Take

*p accel. e cresc. poco a poco*

time, take your

*p accel. e cresc. poco a poco*

BIRTHDAYS

45 *rall. molto* *f* *Lento* *pp*

Take *rall. molto* *f* your time And *pp*

time, take your time And *pp*

*rall. molto* *f* your time, take your time And *pp*

*rall. molto* *f* time, take your time And *pp*

*rall. molto* *f* *mp* *Lento*

for rehearsal only

49 *dolce*

shine your glass - es.

*dolce* shine your glass - es.

*dolce* shine your glass - es.

*dolce* shine your glass - es.

BIRTHDAYS

Figure 5.4. Humor in Kirke Mechem, "Advice on Turning Sixty," from *Birthdays: Round Numbers*, Op. 72, pp. 30-31 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2006).

The piece ends with a slow, stereotypical cadence, with suspensions and traditional voice leading, on the humorous text “shine your glasses.” In the whole cycle, the inventive use of the round, both formally in each piece and in the title of the cycle itself, further communicates wit and humor.

In his settings of familiar tunes and texts, such as in *American Madrigals* and *Three American Folk Songs*, Mechem communicates humor through surprising the audience with changes in tempo, key, meter, or by quoting a familiar melody.<sup>142</sup> All of these tools are used effectively in “Kansas Boys,” which was discussed in Chapter 2. In analyzing his own musical language, Mechem identifies “the interaction between the expected and the unexpected” to be the most crucial element in communicating wit and humor. This demands that the audience understand the musical language being presented so that they can distinguish between the two. Mechem reasons, “nothing falls so flat as an atonal scherzo... Without a common language, there can be no satire, no irony, nor any of the other artful nuances that enrich music.”<sup>143</sup>

### **“Songs of My Old Age”**

In the composer’s latter years, he has chosen to take choral commissions again, being careful to insure he can select or write his own texts so that he can continue to “write what [he] likes.”<sup>144</sup> In what he has coined, the “Songs of My Old Age” (comparing

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<sup>142</sup> MacNeill, Roger. “Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950,” 227.

<sup>143</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 161.

<sup>144</sup> Mechem, interview with the author.

his late choral works to Rossini's "sins of his old age,"<sup>145</sup>) it is no surprise that Mechem has written and selected texts that celebrate music and singing. Mechem's love of music and his beliefs about what it is and can be have been a common thread throughout his life. This important part of his identity is especially featured in his recent choral works. Among his recent choral pieces are, "We Can Sing That!" (2012), "Daybreak in Alabama" (2012), "The Gift of Singing" (2012), "Laugh Till the Music Stops" (2014), "Satan Hates Music" (2014), and "Sing!" (2016), all of which have texts centered on music and singing.

"The Gift of Singing", analyzed in chapter 2, is particularly autobiographical. In it, "Mechem chose an enormous variety of texts, both emotionally touching and amusing, to illustrate his life."<sup>146</sup>

1. I have no thing that is mine sure to give you, I am born so poor.  
 Whatever I have was given me: the earth, the air, the sun, the sea.  
 If I have anything to give made surely of the life I live,  
 It is a song that I have made. Now in your keeping it is laid.  
 --George Dillon (1906-1968)
2. How can I keep from singing? – 19<sup>th</sup> century hymn
3. The only thing better than singing is more singing. --Ella Fitzgerald
4. A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.  
 --Chinese proverb
5. I don't sing because I'm happy; I'm happy because I sing. --William James
6. Some days there won't be a song in your heart. Sing anyway! --Emory Austin
7. Sing out loud in the car, especially if it embarrasses your children.  
 --Marilyn Penland
- (2.) How can I keep from singing?  
 My life flows on in endless song, I hear the music ringing;  
 It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?  
 --19<sup>th</sup> Century Hymn<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 149.

<sup>146</sup> Hansen, "Songs of My Old Age," 23.

<sup>147</sup> Kirke Mechem, "The Gift of Singing," for SATB chorus and piano (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2015), 2.

Mechem, acting as librettist, compiles no fewer than seven text sources varying from hymns to poetry to Chinese proverbs, to a quotation by Ella Fitzgerald, all about the “Gift of Singing.” In this highly unusual text compilation, Mechem’s love of music and singing, sense of humor, bold authenticity and cheerful optimism permeate the text and the music. Regarding this unusual text compilation, Mechem explained,

It seems that my experience with opera has changed my way of writing choral music. There is a curious progression here. As a young choral composer I gradually moved from setting texts verbatim to seeking larger forms by combining and adapting them into cycles, cantatas, and suites, until finally I decided it was time to write operas. And now that I am once again writing choral music, I can’t stop acting like a librettist.<sup>148</sup>

In this special piece, written as a gift for the University of Kansas, both Mechem’s identity as a composer and as a human being is communicated without reserve. A jovial, kind, witty, and passionate individual with a strong sense of justice and integrity, Kirke Mechem has striven to communicate his unique individuality—authentically—through word and music. Through sharing his unique personality he has striven to reach his audience— to move, to entertain, to inspire, to delight.

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<sup>148</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*, 149.

## Conclusion

In looking at Kirke Mechem's body of work and in studying his philosophical and practical writings about music, it is clear that his desire to communicate with his audience is a consistent underpinning of his compositional life. The supremacy of musical communication in his style has impacted his choice of genres, texts, and his musical language. Gravitating largely toward vocal genres (with an added verbal level of communication), Mechem contributed greatly to both the choral and operatic repertoires. Wanting to communicate effectively with his audience, he selected, adapted, or penned hundreds of English-language texts and librettos. Further, in order to speak in a musical language that was understandable by his audience, Mechem chose to write in a tonal language— working within or breaking the expectations inherent in that system to convey meaning.

Mechem occupies a unique position among 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century composers. Unlike those composing under the banner of progress, he has not tried to break new ground for its own sake; rather, he has sought to communicate authentically. He has not chosen to write in standard religious forms (such as mass or motet); instead, he has chosen to set hundreds of English texts that have meaning and interest to him personally. He has not used choral music to create a trademark sonority; his sound is eclectic—changing with the underlying meaning or occasion of each composition. And



unlike many 20<sup>th</sup> century composers of secular music, he has not focused on folk music or arrangements; he prefers to communicate something new to his audience (through the texts he has chosen, adapted, or written). In the few occasions he has used preexisting material, he has created with it an original composition.

Characterized as an eclectic composer,<sup>149</sup> or one who doesn't follow any particular compositional school,<sup>150</sup> there are certain constants in Mechem's musical output. (1) In his vocal works, he chooses vernacular texts of merit and humor; (2) he combines text and music with the specific aim to communicate with his audience; and, (3) in all of his compositions, he shares his own personality. For Kirke Mechem, communication (of text, of emotion, of humor, of story) is the paramount goal—all other elements fall in line behind this.

His unwavering commitment to authentic communication, both verbal and musical, is what most uniquely sets Mechem apart in his musical landscape. In his lifetime, his identities as both writer and composer have found full fruition in his work in the choral and operatic genres, which allow for a marrying of both text and music. Kirke Mechem, as he defines himself in the title of his book, is truly a "lyric composer."<sup>151</sup> His lasting contributions to music will surely stand on this artful combination of music and the written word.

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<sup>149</sup> MacNeill, "Secular Choral Chamber Music in America Since 1950," 223.

<sup>150</sup> Humphrey, "Kirke Mechem," *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>151</sup> Mechem, *Believe Your Ears*.

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## APPENDIX A: Lists of Select Mechem Works by Subject

### Choral Pieces with Humorous Texts:

*Three Madrigals* (1953)

"Rules for Behavior, 1787" (1954)

*Tourist Time: Five Satirical Choruses* (1957)

*Epigrams and Epitaphs* (1951-1963)

*In the Land of Morgenstern* (1963)

*American Madrigals* (1975)

*Catch 22* (and 21 Other Catches and Canons) (1966-1983)

"Time: Lines Found on An Old Bell at Chester" (1996)

*Birthdays: Round Numbers* (2004)

"Satan Hates Music" (2014)

### Choral Pieces with Texts on Social Justice and Peace:

*The Children of David: Five Modern Psalms* (1971)

"Las Americas Unidas" (1986)

"Island in Space" (1989)

"Sing All Ye Joyful" (1991)

*Songs of the Slave* (1993)

"Blessed are They" (1998)

*Peace Motets* (2005)

"The World is Too Much with Us" (2006)

"Once to Every Man and Nation" (2010)

"Daybreak in Alabama" (2012)

"Green Music" (2014)

Choral Pieces with Texts about Music and Singing:

"Lament for a Choral Director" (1963)

*Singing is so Good a Thing: An Elizabethan Recreation* (1971)

"A Choral Tribute: To All Choral Conductors" (1983)

"Sing All Ye Joyful" (1991)

"Professor Nontropo's Music Dictionary" (1993)

"To Music" (1997)

"Daybreak in Alabama" (2012)

"We Can Sing That!" (2012)

"The Gift of Singing" (2014)

"Laugh till the Music Stops" (2014)

"Satan Hates Music" (2014)

"Glory: With Joyful Song and Tender Mirth" (2016)

"Sing!" (2016)

Sacred Choral Works by Kirke Mechem

"Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord" (1951)

*Songs of Wisdom: Sacred Cantata* (1959)

*Seven Joys of Christmas: A Sequence of Carols* (1964)

"Sing Unto the Lord a New Song" (1964)

*The Children of David: Five Modern Psalms* (1971)

"Why Art Thou Cast Down?" (1973)

*Three Short Anthems* (1974)

(1. I will Sing, Alleluia, 2. It is Good to Give Thanks, 3. Psalm 23)

*Christmas Past and Christmas Present* (1987)

"Blow Ye the Trumpet" (from *Songs of the Slave*) (1991)

"Dan-u-el" (from *Songs of the Slave*) (1991)

Sacred Choral Works by Kirke Mechem, continued

*Three Motets* (1994)

(1. Gloria, 2. Alleluia, Amen, 3. Cantate Domino)

“Rejoice: an Easter Psalm” (1997)

“Blessed are They” (1998)

“Missa Brevis: (“Trinity”)” (2000)

*Peace Motets* (2005)

(1. By the Rivers of Babylon, 2. Agnus Dei (Dona Nobis Pacem))

## APPENDIX B: Pieces with Texts Written or Adapted by the Composer

### Humorous Texts Written (or Adapted) by Mechem (including texts about music):

“Lament for a Choral Conductor” (1973)

*Written for William D. Hall*

“Professor Nontropo’s Music Dictionary” (1973)

*For the European tour of the United States Honor Choir*

*Dr. Charlene Archibeque, Director*

*American Madrigals* –adapted (1976)

*Commissioned for the American Bicentennial by the Dallas Civic Chorus*

*Lloyd Pfautch, Director*

“A Choral Tribute” (1985)

*Commissioned by The Los Angeles Master Chorale*

*to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Roger Wagner*

“We Can Sing That!” (2013)

*Commissioned by the Orange County Women’s Chorus, on their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary/ SATB*

*version commissioned by Volti San Francisco, on their 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary*

“Laugh till the Music Stops” –adapted (2014)

*Commissioned by the Kirkland Choral Society for its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary*

“The Gift of Singing” —adapted from various sources (2015)

*A gift to the University of Kansas as a token of thanks*

*for its honorary Doctor of Arts degree, 2012*

“Sing” –adapted (2017)

*Commissioned by Joseph Huszti for “The Men in Blague,” Irvine, CA*

*to celebrate the chorus’s twentieth anniversary*



Sacred Texts Adapted (or Written) by Mechem:

“Praise Him, Sun and Moon” (1971)

Adapted from Psalms 147 and 148

“Why Art Thou Cast Down?” (1975)

Adapted from Psalm 42

*Three Short Anthems* (1974)

Adapted from Psalms

*The King’s Contest* (1978)

Adapted from the Apocrypha, 1 Esdras

“Laudate” (1983)

Adapted from Psalm 147

“Christmas Present” (1987)—written by Mechem

*Three Motets* (1994)

Adapted from Psalm 96, and an anonymous 15<sup>th</sup> century text

“Rejoice: An Easter Psalm” (1997)—written by Mechem

“To Music” (1999)

Adaption and compilation from 11 text sources

“Satan Hates Music” (2015)—written by Mechem

Inspired by the writing of Martin Luther

“Great is the Truth” (2017)—written by Mechem

Adapted from Psalm 49, Apocrypha: 1 Esdras

## APPENDIX C: Interview with Kirke Mechem

Interviewer: Kirstina Rasmussen Collins

Date: August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Place: Kirke Mechem's home, San Francisco, CA

Kirke Mechem: (sung) Are you going to sing your questions?

Kirstina Rasmussen Collins: That might make it more fun!

KM: End your question with a half cadence, then I have to answer with a full cadence. That's what Professor Ratner made us do at Stanford. When we were studying the Mozart period in harmony class, he would sing a made-up four-measure phrase ending on the dominant, and each of us in turn would have to sing an answer to his phrase, ending on the tonic. Then he would show us pieces of Mozart that did just that.

KRC: He sounds like an amazing theory teacher.

KM: He was a great teacher but like all of us, he had his limitations. He made one pianist in our class quite angry because Ratner didn't like Chopin; he said Chopin didn't have a sense of classic form! But he had a great sense of humor and a really nice way of explaining things — a wonderful teacher.

KRC: So was he a composer too?

KM: He was; he started out as a composer. I think a short piece of his was played by the

New York Philharmonic when he was at Julliard, but he gave it up quite early. I don't think I ever heard a piece of his at Stanford.

KRC: But he wrote theory texts?

KM: No, he didn't write theory texts, he wrote books on classic form, quite a few.

KRC: Okay!

KM: Okay, number one question —

KRC: I wish I was a better interviewer, like my husband but you know...

KM: I'd hate to be faced with a *professional* interviewer!

KRC: Yes, I read your book and dog-eared about a bazillion pages of things I found...

KM: Then there's nothing I can tell you — the book contains everything I know.

KRC: Well you know I figured it but I'm sure that there's, you know, areas that you could have shared more about, and I have questions that I don't recall reading in your book. I could be wrong (you'll be like "that's on page 15")! So I wanted to start back on your childhood. I know you received piano lessons from your mother, is that right? Or did you have a different teacher?

KM: No, she was my only teacher. Unfortunately, she wasn't the right teacher for me because my approach to everything had been how to create it. Anything I ever did when I was a kid was just so I could make it myself, and she didn't think of music that way. (My father, however, did. Even though he was a writer rather than a musician, he

always thought of music from the point of view of the composer.) She had never considered that side of music, though she was very musical. To hear her play was to know that she felt every phrase. But teaching a child like me — I was a very obstreperous kid — was probably very hard. I didn't want to learn the little things like “that note means you use this finger” — that kind of thing. I remember one of my first requests, since I was so interested in sports, was, “I want to play the Notre Dame Fight Song.” She answered, “I don't know that.” So I went to the piano and played the melody for her. “Well, okay,” she said and she was able to figure out some chords. That was my first piece. (By the way, did you ever notice the similarity between the Notre Dame Fight Song and “White Christmas”?)

KRC: Well, sing the Notre Dame fight song because I can't imagine it.

[Music]

Ah, yes. So that was the only music training you received from your mother?

KM: Yes, although in those days in Kansas we always had a lot of music. From the first grade on we sang in class; they gave us the rudiments of reading music. But sports was everything to me.

KRC: So your parents — in the book you say they used sports as a motivation to get you to practice piano.

KM: Right. That's how they bribed me to keep practicing. A baseball mitt for six months practice, etc. I wish they had been more successful!

KRC: Well, you write really well for the piano.

KM: But I can't play some of my own pieces.

KRC: I know what you mean. So did you ever compose as a child?

KM: Not till I was interested in pop music, when we started having school dances. We all listened to the Hit Parade, and I would learn to play those songs. Then I began to write my *own* unpopular pop songs. I wrote a lot of them. They were really awful. (laughter) Believe me.

KRC: So who were the popular singers when you were a young teen?

KM: That was the time of the Frank Sinatra craze.

KRC: Okay, the crooners.

KM: Yes, the crooners. Bing Crosby was right before Sinatra, but all the big bands had singers of their own. But I wasn't a real buff; I never kept track of who sang what with which band, but I loved (still love) big band music.

KRC: So I wrote, "Can you describe your first experience composing"... you kind of answered that where you were... you had experienced figuring out by ear the popular songs, and then you started writing your own.

KM: Right, and in my book I described how my girlfriend's brother showed me the rudiments of chords. I had kind of figured that out, but it was really helpful to have triads explained — major, minor, diminished, augmented — because I didn't know what to call them, I just knew that they were different sounds.

KRC: So you began to figure out songs by ear?

KM: Yes, but I never had a good memory for *anything* — for poems in school, or for

music — it's just a shortcoming, or I maybe I just never developed it, I don't know. And I can't claim that composers have to *create* music because they have bad memories. That's totally wrong; as you know, Mozart, Saint-Saëns and many other composers had fantastic memories.

KRC: All right let's see, did your father listen to classical or popular music when you were a kid?

KM: When I was a kid? Well, my father and mother listened to the New York Philharmonic every Sunday on the radio and the Met Opera on Saturdays. My father loved classical music. I'm sure that one of the things that attracted him to my mother was that she was a wonderful pianist. His mother and his two sisters played the piano.

KRC: So he didn't listen to big band or ...?

KM: That came a little after his time. I think that for most of us, our taste is formed in our adolescence.

KRC: Would he have liked Gershwin?

KM: Oh yes, he loved Gershwin, and I do too. (chuckles) Anybody who doesn't is suspect. (laughter)

KRC: Okay so he liked the popular music of his youth.

KM: In his day (he was born in 1889) it was ragtime. And he sang in a barbershop quartet.

KRC: Did he listen to records?

KM: They didn't listen to records much. Records then were big 78s and they cost quite a bit of money. (Remember, I grew up during the Great Depression.) My father loved to hear the music my mother played. I remember that we had records of Sousa marches; I loved those. I still love them. We also had some Ravel, Tchaikovsky, and some Bach; my mother played quite a lot of Bach. I would put on a record sometimes after a date when I was feeling not ready to go to bed yet. We had a little electric grate in a small parlor off our living room. It was gas and it made a little faux-fire in a fireplace. I would turn that on late at night and listen to music; it was very comforting.

KRC: Sounds like your choices were mostly classical to listen to.

KM: Yes.

KRC: That's nice.

KM: That of course was when I was in my adolescence — 15, 16, 17, not earlier.

KRC: Can you imagine young men today coming home from a date and putting on Ravel... (chuckles)

KM: Well, someone somewhere. I doubt if many of them did in my day either. (laughter) But I had the advantage of hearing music every day of my life. That's the deciding factor, I think. Any kid today whose mother is a classical pianist probably has the same taste I did. But it's hard to compare different eras.

KRC: That's really cool. So you went to Stanford?

KM: I did.

KRC: And you went there for tennis — that's how you got a scholarship?

KM: I did have an academic scholarship but I didn't need it. I had been in the army during World War II, so I had the GI Bill. I told in my book how lucky it was that I caught spinal meningitis the first week I was in the army, which delayed my basic training and duty overseas by four months. That was just enough to keep me behind the fighting. But it was also lucky that after two years at Stanford I got a letter from the American Red Cross with news that I had been judged to have a ten percent disability because of contracting spinal meningitis in the army. And with that I got an increased stipend every month. It wasn't a lot but they paid me retroactively, so I had several hundred dollars all of a sudden. Much more important was that I got an extra year or two of the GI bill. So I was able to change my major from English to Music (which I would have done anyway) at the end of my junior year. I couldn't finish in one more year because I missed many required courses for a major in music. The GI bonus also gave me the year of graduate school at Harvard free. So a scholarship, who needs that?

KRC: Amazing!

KM: My life has been just one stroke of luck after another. Really, it's almost unbelievable.

KRC: Mmm. That's really special. So when you went to Stanford... did it have a School of Music or did it have a brand new Department of Music when you got there?

KM: The latter. It was the first year you could major in music. I was in the first graduating class of Stanford music majors. Classes were tiny: four people in my theory class — it was like private lessons!



KRC: And did, would you say that getting a music degree at Stanford was a lot different than somewhere else as far as them supporting tonal composition?

KM: Yes I think so, if you compare it with UC Berkeley, which like many— I won't say “most” because I don't know really — but many of the big schools and conservatories had professors who were writing atonal music; they felt that it was the music of the future. There were some big schools that even discontinued teaching tonal harmony. That was a big mistake, I think, because all musicians need to understand the harmony and counterpoint that were used to compose the classic literature that's still being played and always will be.

KRC: Right, of course. It's like a modern dancer needs to know ballet.

KM: Right! Anyway, I probably wouldn't have been accepted by most conservatories. I don't even know that Stanford ever auditioned anybody to become a music major. I just slid into it by taking harmony and counterpoint for two years, though still an English major. I did very well in these courses because I had already figured out much of the harmony. (But not counterpoint, which I didn't know anything about, but certainly learned from singing in chorus.) That was another stroke of luck — that the first harmony class I ever took was given by the choral director, Harold Schmidt, who made us sing in his chorus.

KRC: Ah, that's why you sang in the chorus!

KM: Yes. He needed bodies. (laughter) He was new there, as most of the faculty were. Harold Schmidt became my mentor and benefactor in every way.

KRC: So Stanford then was, you would say, either just kind of a minor school or different than the typical.

KM: Very different from the typical, because it was new. But it had drawbacks caused by that fact I suppose. There weren't quite as many avenues you could follow, but they made up for that in pretty short order, particularly with new music — computer music. My wife and I recently hosted some musicians from Japan. The first thing that the composer wanted to do was go to Stanford and visit the famous computer center. The department founded it within the first ten years. The department head, Loren Crosten, was also determined that Stanford would have a good orchestra. The first year, Leonard Ratner conducted; he was not only a composer, but a violinist. (Schmidt was also a violinist as well as a singer.) In the second year, Stanford hired Sandor Salgo, who was at Princeton at the time. He was a superlative violinist and violist who had played in some of the most notable quartets in Europe. He was trained at the Budapest Academy, had a great ear, and was given permission by the department to use non-students in his orchestra. In a university of that size, it seems that all doctors and scientists love music, and there are excellent performers among them. (In every city there used to be a doctor's symphony. There was one in San Francisco, too.) Salgo was also given permission to hire some key professional players as needed, and he built a terrific orchestra. I remember them playing Bartok's new *Concerto for Orchestra*; they knocked the socks off of it! (Salgo had studied with Bartok and Kodaly in Budapest.)

KRC: So were composers there in the early years, were they writing atonal music as well or mostly not?

KM: I don't think a single one of the composers at Stanford when I was there were writing that kind of music. At Berkeley nearly all of them were; the teachers were Roger Sessions, Andrew Imbry and Leon Kirchner, all very well known and excellent musicians. They believed in atonality, so it's only natural that their students would be taught that.

KRC: So that was probably a stroke of luck for you as well.

KM: Well, there are people who would say that it was a stroke of *bad* luck — that the reason I was not taken seriously as a composer in some quarters was because I didn't write atonal music. But that hasn't bothered me. Of course I didn't enjoy being criticized by reviewers who had only the kind of education I have just described. To them, I was like a Holocaust denier or a Flat-earth freak; I just didn't get it. But that didn't happen for the first ten years I was writing music. I was fortunate in getting excellent reviews when I started out, and won some important competitions. It wasn't until about the time Josef Krips left the San Francisco Symphony and was replaced by Seiji Ozawa, who was much younger and interested mainly in composers who wrote "advanced" music. (Krips would play anything I wrote, and even repeated my Second Symphony two years after the premiere.) But soon the critics began to change, too: what Ozawa liked they decided must be good. And that's one of the reasons I wanted to leave San Francisco. I thought I would try going to England to see if it was any kinder to tonal composers. But as you read in my book, that chapter is called "Deceptive Cadence."

KRC: So you received a degree in composition from Stanford?

KM: They didn't have such a thing; it was just a BA with a major in music.

KRC: Okay, and do you remember the exact years you were at Stanford?

KM: I began in the summer of 1946. I would have graduated in the class of 1950 if I had remained an English major. But by having to stay an extra year I didn't graduate until '51. Then I went to Harvard and received an MA in 1953.

KRC: So it was only a one-year master's?

KM: Yes, you could get a master's in one year, but mine was delayed for a couple of reasons. Read my book.

KRC: I'm sure that for some accelerated programs that is still possible, but usually it takes two years. And did you choose Harvard because you felt like it was like-minded teachers in the style you were interested in writing?

KM: Harold Schmidt really decided that for me. When the head of the department told me that since I wasn't of professional caliber on any instrument, my future would be as a teacher in a junior college (and Stanford just happened to be establishing such a training program!) When I told Schmidt that, he blew up. "Don't listen to that nonsense," he said. "You're going to Harvard and study with Randall Thompson and Walter Piston. And so I did!

KRC: And so he had that vision for you.

KM: Yes.

KRC: And that was a connection for him? Randall Thompson and he were connected?

KM: Yes, Schmidt had attended Harvard. He and Thompson were friends (Virgil Thomson, too). Schmidt had tried out my choral pieces when I was a student at Stanford, where we sang a lot of Randall Thompson's music. It was only natural that he should want me to study with Thompson at Harvard.

KRC: Yes, got it. So, did Schmidt see you as a choral composer?

KM: Yes, and a conductor. That's why Schmidt got me a part-time job at Menlo College. Harvard had recommended me for a tenure-track conducting/teaching job at a major

university, but I didn't feel ready for it yet. Having taken up music so late, I knew I had much to learn. I wanted a job that would be part-time, that would give me time to become better at the piano, to practice score-reading, and to just study more music. Growing up in Topeka, how many concerts did I hear? I heard my mother play a lot of music, but there were very few concerts, and I never saw an opera. Occasionally the Kansas City Philharmonic — that's what it was called in those days — would play a concert in Topeka. But even at Stanford and at Harvard I was too busy and had little money, so how could I go to operas or concerts? That's why several years later, Vienna was so important to me. It gave me a chance to immerse myself in music, to go every day to one or two concerts, and to have time to study and to write music — just one more example of how fortunately my life has had a chance to develop.

KRC: Was it common to live in Europe at that time? Did many artists just go over there and why did you go?

KM: Many had gone to Europe ever since the end of the war. Even before the war, a number of American composers went to Paris to study with Nadie Boulanger: Piston, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, and I think one of her last pupils was my friend, David Conte, who teaches here in the San Francisco Conservatory. I didn't know any other American composers in Vienna when I was there. There were a few American music students, and I met H. C. Robbins Landon, the great Haydn and Mozart scholar. He helped me find a good music copyist; Robbins was a very nice guy. But Vienna wasn't a common goal for American music students.

KRC: What brought you there? What told you to go?

KM: Well again, Harold Schmidt.

KRC: So, you were talking about Schmidt telling you to go to Europe .

KM: I had been his assistant in addition to my Menlo job. I worked for three years at Stanford as assistant choral conductor and teacher. I taught harmony and conducted an opera. The faculty were all young, in their forties; there was no position going to open for me to step into. So Schmidt told me I should go to Europe for a year. What I didn't know then, but found out later, was that Harvard had sounded him out about whether I was ready to come to Harvard to become choral director and teacher. I found out later that the job wasn't going to open up until the following year. Schmidt couldn't keep me at Stanford any longer because the job I had there was supposed to go to doctoral students for no more than two years. I had had it for three. Schmidt didn't want me to miss Harvard by taking a tenure-track job somewhere else, so he told me I needed "to get a year of European experience."

We went to Vienna and toward the end of that first year, sure enough, I got a telegram from Harvard asking me to come and conduct the Radcliffe chorus and to teach harmony. My book explains why I turned it down. Thinking back, I suspected that Harold Schmidt had once "auditioned" me for Harvard. We were working on the Brahms Requiem and he said he couldn't take the rehearsal one evening and would I do it? I did, and at one point I caught a momentary glimpse of him peeking around a door at the back. He was observing me the whole time—this without telling me. And I must have passed the test!

KRC: So, I just—I was so surprised when I read that part in your book, you know, with me and my own career in dealing with deciding which directions to go, and reading that you turned that down, I was like, "Wow! That took guts to do that." And I wonder if some "what if" goes on in your mind or if you always felt good about your choice.

KM: I didn't really want to be a conductor. I have a lousy memory, so even when I conduct my own works, even something I've just finished, I have to use the score. That would make a full-time conducting job much more difficult. I was just talking with my

wife about the Harvard decision the other day. My whole life has been unplanned, just a series of good luck — events that I should have planned but didn't, turning out fortunately. How strange it now seems, thinking back—a graduating university senior doesn't know what he's going to do next and it's already spring. His department chairman asks him about his plans for the next year and he has no idea! Somebody tells him he should go to Harvard, so he does.

KRC: I would think today that would be unheard of.

KM: Right, and it was probably rather unusual in that day too. After Harvard, I spent the summer with my parents in Lindsborg, Kansas. I had no plans. One day the phone rang and it was Harold Schmidt. Someone had just come to see him from Menlo College, two miles from Stanford. Menlo's music teacher had left suddenly and they needed somebody to take over their music program. It was only a part-time job, exactly what I wanted! I conducted the glee club, a little band at football games, gave some private piano lessons to children, and was also the tennis coach. Harold Schmidt hired me for the next three years to be his assistant. None of it planned!

Another lucky thing: the girl I fell in love with at Harvard turned out to be Randall Thompson's niece. We hit it off wonderfully, but she had two more years at Smith (she was at Harvard just for summer school). I came back to California, we wrote letters for a while and then it kind of ebbed away from too much time and space. I dated different girls, but eventually Donata Coletti came out to San Francisco and the rest is joyful history. She's a wonderful, beautiful woman and very musical. She plays the violin in the San Francisco Civic Symphony; she sang at Smith and we met in the Harvard summer school chorus. We had saved up a small amount of money which made it possible for us to go to Vienna. And the exchange rate made Vienna dirt cheap — forty-five dollars a month for an apartment, great concerts for 25 cents! Have I got off the track here?

KRC: That's okay. I always have my questions I can come back to. So that answered my question about Europe and why you were there and how you afforded to live there... so I'm gonna go back a little bit. Before you went to college did you know any modern composers by name?

KM: Well certainly Gershwin and Aaron Copland. I knew Stravinsky; my older brother liked Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, but we thought he was just showing off how modern he was. My mother played mostly Chopin, Bach and Beethoven, but also many smaller pieces by twentieth-century composers — Debussy, Ravel, Bartok, de Falla, MacDowell, Gershwin, Palmgren, Villa-Lobos, Rachmaninoff of course. He was still alive in those days and she played the second and the third concertos.

But I remember now the track that I was on after telling you about Vienna. We bought a beat-up house in San Francisco and I needed a job. I looked around but it was already September. So of course Lucky Mechem suddenly gets a call from the San Francisco College for Women, whose music department needs a replacement immediately. It was a full-time job but only interim. The first thing I did for them was to write *Seven Joys of Christmas* for their Christmas program (more about that in my book).

KRC: My friend Jenny Bent said "I'm so excited you're interviewing Kirke Mechem," she's like, "I've done the Seven Joys of Christmas I think 50 times!" (laughter)

KM: Oh, that's nice; yes, it's a bread-and-butter piece. Christmas comes every year. I think I should start writing a series of seasonal pieces — how about *A Valentine Cantata*, a *Groundhog-Day Oratorio*?

KRC: If only choirs would orient their concerts to those holidays. (laughter) So you always wanted a part-time job.



KM: Later, San Francisco College for Women (like a lot of women's schools) became co-ed, and changed its name to Lone Mountain College. It's right across the street from the University of San Francisco and was always the music department for USF. My students were both men and women. I was full time that first year, and got a half-time job at San Francisco State University the next year. Then Lone Mountain hired me back as composer-in-residence. It was a really nice job with a good salary. I taught theory Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from one o'clock til three o'clock and that was it. No faculty meetings, but the name of the school was to be attached to my name whenever my music was performed at the symphony or anywhere else.

KRC: That sounds great. And did you stay there a long time?

KM: I think it was six or seven years until we went to London for a year.

KRC: Okay, and when you came back from London did you go back to part-time teaching?

KM: No, I didn't have to. By then I was doing well with more commissions and royalties. Also, Donata's father, a noted Boston sculptor, died about that time and we began to get some income from his estate. And we still had some income from her mother's trust fund. (And on the other side of the ledger, four children!)

KRC: Excellent. Okay I want to get into talking about your music itself.

KM: As I said, this is a good luck story. I have not had to deal with the university tenure track, which can be quite tough on someone who just wants to compose. I sympathize with those talented colleagues who have not been so lucky. Having to do most of your composing in the summers — that's hard. For that reason I didn't apply for Guggenheims or similar grants, which should go to those who need the time off.

KRC: So let's see, and let me know if you ever want to take a break. So did you actively seek out commissions or did they mostly come to you?

KM: Once or twice I have described a piece I was writing to a conductor friend and asked if he might want to commission it. At ACDA conventions, one or two conductors nearly always ask if they could commission a piece.

KRC: So you networked but..

KM: Not so much as composers in academia. By that time I wasn't conducting anymore, but as I had many friends in choral music I went to conventions now and then to visit and to hear new pieces. But choral composers in big university programs do have one advantage. They stay in close touch with their colleagues and other conductors. That must help sales. They are also asked to do guest conducting and can include some of their own work. But as a composer of many other kinds of music, I am not in such close touch with the choral world. I attended few choral conventions for the thirty some years I was writing operas, and didn't even go to many Opera America conferences. At first, I did attend National Opera Association meetings pretty often; that is an organization mostly of university opera programs, many of which performed *Tartuffe*.

KRC: So opera began to take over your musical life?

KM: Yes, I did feel, once I started writing operas, "Why didn't I do this earlier?" But I wasn't ready to do it earlier. I couldn't have done it if I hadn't written so many choral pieces with soloists and instrumental accompaniments of various kinds, from a few instruments to full symphony orchestra or chamber orchestra. So maybe it's a good thing I didn't try to write *Tartuffe* fifteen or twenty years earlier.

KRC: But there was that sense of “this is what I'm supposed to do.”

KM: Yes, I definitely felt that. And I do believe now that if anything of mine is ever remembered it will be the operas and some of the choral music. Some of the latter are already in the repertoire; that doesn't mean they won't slip out of it, but at least they're in there now, and that's not true of the operas yet, except perhaps *Tartuffe*.

KRC: I listened to all of the opera clips on your website and found *John Brown* extremely moving. All of the music was just beautiful.

KM: It's my best, I think, at least the most ambitious and powerful. The suite from it, *Songs of the Slave*, has had over a hundred performances — many by choral conductors — and I get wonderful feedback from it: “This moved me like no contemporary piece ever has.” I hope that it will eventually move more opera impresarios to stage the entire opera, and number two, I hope that if it does I'm still around.

KRC: Or that you're still alive somewhere else, watching. (laughter)

KM: Right. Look at poor Bizet! He wrote a number of operas not named *Carmen*, and only one of them was moderately successful — *The Pearl Fishers*. I think the only reason it's performed at all is because *Carmen* is so great. It's the most performed opera in the world, in the history of opera, and Bizet died thinking it was a failure. It just hadn't caught fire yet. I read someplace that Brahms, who didn't like opera very much, went to *Carmen* twenty times!

KRC: Well I was thinking about how Brahms took so long to write a symphony and how you waited so long to start operas.

KM: Even longer. But Brahms was writing great music when he was 15. I didn't start

writing any kind of music except terrible pop songs at that age, but no serious music until I was in my late 20s.

KRC: So what was the trigger for you that got you to start writing *Tartuffe*?

KM: I think it started in Vienna — feeling the *importance* of opera. Also, I wrote more and more choral pieces in which I was contributing to the text — putting poems together or editing them to create a “libretto.” I began choosing more dramatic texts — like *The King’s Contest*; that’s almost an opera. And then seeing more and more operas that I really liked. It was only a matter of time before I realized, “Now I need to write an opera.” Almost all of my big pieces up until then — whether choral, chamber or orchestral — they were all to see if I could do it. (laughter) When you start as late as I did, and you’ve had success with smaller pieces, you want to see what you’re capable of. That’s how it was with *Tartuffe*. I enjoyed writing it so much — and I can’t explain this — I truly felt I knew what I was doing! I thought I understood why so many of the new operas I saw were failures. Sometimes you learn as much from what doesn’t work as from what does. There are no rules. Everything I have ever said about composition can be disproved by someone else’s success in doing the opposite. Anyone who has the real gift will compose in his or her own way. They’ll know it’s right. You may remember from my book how strange it seemed to me that the great performers of *Tartuffe*’s premiere didn’t know that it was going to be a hit. I couldn’t understand it.

KRC: Yeah. Well what did you think of the operas of Britten?

KM: *Peter Grimes* was always one of my favorites. Stanford gave the West Coast premiere.

KRC: Wow.

KM: Ditto with Stravinsky's *The Rakes Progress*. I was in the chorus and learned a lot about opera. I still love a lot of the music in *Peter Grimes*, but I don't think it's a great opera. It doesn't quite make sense to me why it should be such a downer. But it will stay in the repertoire because there's so much great music in it. On the other hand (and I probably shouldn't say this while I'm being taped because some will consider it blasphemy), I don't think the *War Requiem* is one of Britten's best works. I've heard it many times and always want to like it because the poems and the concept are so wonderful. But I find that only about twenty percent of the music is great and about twenty percent is not very good. The other 60% is not the best Britten but still good. It's not a piece I want to hear again.

I grew up loving Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. For years after I wrote *Seven Joys*, I was asked to make a harp accompaniment for it so that it could share a program with the Britten. I wouldn't do it; I felt that the two would be compared and mine would come up very short. The Britten is a great original piece, while mine is just a collection of arrangements. (Well, a bit more than arrangements, but that's the basis.) I finally decided, however, that *Seven Joys of Christmas* is what it is, and if I wrote a nice harp accompaniment, a lot of choral singers would be grateful.

KRC: You don't have an SSA, version do you?

KM: SSA is the original version. It was written for the SF College for Women. My little group that sang the premiere performed a cappella. I had seven days before the first rehearsal, not enough time to write an accompaniment.

KRC: Yeah, that comes later. That's impressive. Well, I would love to touch on your instrumental music. Can you describe your output of instrumental music over the years?

KM: I was frequently writing choral music because that's how I got started: I won the Boott Prize at Harvard, which hadn't had a winner for several years, and the Inter-

American Music Award for vocal music sponsored by CF Peters and the SAI music fraternity. My pieces were getting published immediately by E.C. Schirmer and G. Schirmer (AMP). But I didn't want to restrict myself to choral music. I wrote a piano suite that was played quite a bit, a woodwind trio, a piano trio, a string quartet, a Divertimento for Flute and Strings (one of my favorite pieces) and a couple of books of violin duets. So I really wanted to be a broad composer— not just of vocal or choral music. I found that my choral music was in demand before I knew it. I didn't know there was such a thing as ACDA or the *Choral Journal* until a publisher told me. I discovered that publishers would take on a piano trio or a difficult piano sonata if I would give them some choral music.

KRC: So did you continue to do that or at some point have you become more a vocal composer?

KM: When I started writing operas, I mostly settled into that, but the symphonies and other orchestral pieces had been pretty successful. Music critics, however, seem to have had a different standard for instrumental music than they did for vocal music. In vocal music it was still okay to write tonal music, but instrumental music was different. My first symphony was a remarkable success, even with the critics. (It was much more “advanced” than my choral music of the time). Obviously, instruments can do all kinds of things that voices can't. I loved Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bartok and Kodaly, as well as Copland and Gershwin. My Second Symphony wasn't as good the first time I wrote it; it needed a fourth movement. And Krips made the mistake of performing it on the same program with pieces of Prokofiev and Stravinsky. But after the last performance he told me, “If you write a fourth movement, I'll play it again in two years.” So I revised it, and in two years it was much better received by audiences and most critics.

KRC: That answered that question and you also answered my question here when I say “what composers and musical styles have most influenced you?” but you just

mentioned Bartok and Prokofiev and Gershwin...

KM: A critic asked me that question before a performance of one of the symphonies: "What composers have most influenced you?" Just off the top of my head, without really thinking about it, I said, "Oh you know, Bartok, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Gershwin, Copland." When his review came out in the paper, the second paragraph read, "Mechem was obviously influenced by Bartok, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Gershwin and Copland, and his music shows that he does not seem to find his way out of that style." (laughter) So I resist that question. I would just say that all composers — like everyone else — go through phases. At one time, I wanted to hear everything I could of Stravinsky; later I went through phases of Prokofiev, Hindemith, Copland and Gershwin. Not to mention Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and countless others. We learn from them all and we learn to avoid their most characteristic mannerisms. We have to find our own way. Every great composer has at first learned from imitating. I read that the young Mozart, composing his first cello sonata, placed such a piece by Boccherini right in front of his writing desk. I don't know if that is true, but it certainly could be.

KRC: Well I read in your book and have heard that you're an avid concert goer, and do you feel like that's influenced your music?

KM: I was drunk on music those three years in Vienna; I had never had that opportunity before. When we returned to the Bay Area, we subscribed to the symphony and opera seasons and attended most chamber music events. I was still forming my taste; I wanted to hear everything live. But at 93 I can't do that so much anymore. For one thing, I get tired in the evening. In the morning I may intend to go to a concert but when it becomes seven o'clock at night I no longer want to do anything! Still, I have so many friends in the business, I hate to miss any of their concerts. But I can't go to all of them. And I like to hear new pieces and music that my colleagues are writing, but there is just not enough time. I'm also not composing as much anymore.

KRC: When you think back on your career, how would you describe your approach to writing music?

KM: I think the best way to describe my approach to music, whether it's opera or choral music or instrumental — what's common to all of them is — I picture myself in the audience. “Would I like this?” And that's about all you can do. In other words, I'm going to write what I like, and I am similar enough to most audience members that I expect to reach the people who love opera, symphonies, choral and chamber music. If I can satisfy them and make them feel all that I feel when I'm composing, then I've succeeded. I don't have to reinvent music. It will be me — it won't be anybody else — it will sound like my music. (I hope!)

KRC: It's kind of simple but so true. Do other people try to describe your style or characterize your music? From what you've read in your reviews over the years.

KM: Oh yes, it all depends on which critic. They're just like other people. They have their own tastes. I have written much in my book about “problems” of new music in the twentieth century, so I won't rehash it here.

KRC: So speaking to your style and composing, what type of formal procedures do you use in composing? I know you use many like canon and counterpoint and everything but are you, is that just a dumb question? Do you use 20<sup>th</sup> century specific techniques when you compose?

KM: There are certain kinds of modern harmonies that I use a lot — and I'm not afraid of classical harmony — but I try to make them sound different in different contexts, and the nice thing about opera is that you have so *many* contexts. Particularly if there is a definite time period, as for instance in *Pride and Prejudice*. I loved composing it because



I could write in my own style most of the time, but sometimes — say, in some of the dances — I could imitate the period. I could write my *own* minuet, my *own* gavotte, my *own* jig, but with personal touches and modern orchestration, but still giving the flavor of the time.

KRC: So do you feel that *Pride & Prejudice* will be your most popular opera?

KM: Everyone knows it's a wonderful story, and I think it's brought out the best in me. It has everything — lots of light-hearted music, humor and satire (which audiences enjoyed in *Tartuffe*), and in the last act it is a poignant love story — very beautiful! It's full of ensembles, dance music, arias, duets — what more could you ask for?

KRC: So your concept of — your theory of tonality and twentieth century music and treating it as a language versus a science — when did you develop that concept, or come up with that inspiration for yourself?

KM: I don't think I ever did, I just always wrote the music I liked. But if you listen to the piano sonata and string quartet you may wonder whether they really are tonal! It's a very free tonality. I used to think that some audiences would be put off by them, but that hasn't been the case. Audiences seem to like the string quartet better than I do! They've been so used to gritting their teeth at new atonal pieces, that when they hear something dissonant that they still can follow, something with rhythm and melody, they are hugely relieved.

KRC: So I don't mean in your music, but when did you come up with your idea (because I haven't ever heard anyone else describe it this way) that what caused a problem in the evolution of music, was the classification? When did that come to your mind?

KM: Probably in that 1965 article I wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle when my first symphony was premiered. This is all described in my book, so I won't repeat it all. But in writing the book I finally came to the last chapter — a summing-up —and tried to construct a coherent view of what had actually happened to music in the twentieth century. Maybe not *why*, but at least *how* it happened, and what the effect has been. Is tonality necessary? If so, why? Or to say it another way, "What is it about atonality that makes it sound unmusical to most music lovers?" I've never seen anything written that tries to solve that problem, so I thought I'd give it a try.

KRC: I really think you did a good job-- it made complete sense to me. I was bringing it up to a friend of mine who just got into the film scoring master's program at USC. He said, "But wait a minute, music is a science: Pythagoras said it was a science and Plato classified it as one of the sciences" So, obviously there is a science to music, there's acoustics. That's why triads sound good, that's why octaves disappear, right? So it is a science on some level.

KM: Well, you can say that language is a science too if you want to stretch the definition far enough out of shape. You can say that there is a science in everything: collecting stamps, darning socks, making money. Just as you can say that there is an art to all of these things. But none of them is a language — a means of communication. That's what English and Russian and Swahili are. Both the speaker and listener must "speak" the same language. The same is true of music, but not true of science.

KRC: Because my friend also said "but I totally agree that music is a language." He's like, "that's the first thing we learn when we're film scoring." It's a language!

KM: Sure, film music wouldn't dare use atonal music for a love scene. They might use atonal music for something confusing, alienating, for outer space, for something that you can't understand on its own.

KRC: Right. Or a lot of dissonance on a scary section.

KM: Right. I've been to atonal operas where you can't tell from the music whether it's a love scene or a nervous breakdown. (laughter)

KRC: That must have been a hard one to sit through.

KM: There were a lot of them in the 60s and 70s and 80s — that's about the only kind of operas that were being written! And still there were the deep thinkers who wrote to music magazines, "These operas aren't good enough! We need to get our best composers writing operas — Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter"!

KRC: So do you think that minimalism helped to kind of shake things up enough to...

KM: Oh yes.

KRC: We can "be ourselves again."

KM: Right, right, it was the kind of reaction you get to every action that has gone too far. And music was getting more and more complicated, getting farther away from tonality, getting very, very dissonant. That prompted many young composers to go for simplicity. And just as they were reacting against something extreme, their simplicity also became extreme. But composers like John Adams outgrew that and made something a lot more interesting out of it.

KRC: And I feel like people, everyday people know Philip Glass. So he's almost, almost like popular music - which is good.

KM: No comment.

KRC: Because you mentioned that the 20<sup>th</sup> century completely split apart popular and classical music to a point where they may not be bridgeable.

KM: Well, some of us are trying.

KRC: I don't know if it's worth asking, but how would you describe the evolution of the state of the arts over the course of your career.

KM: Actually, it was quite uneven throughout that time. I resist qualifying or quantifying things like this.

KRC: How has being original or originality played into your thought process as you compose? You say you're a conservationist, right? You're not a traditionalist,

KM: Well, some call me a conservative. I don't like that label because I'm not conservative personally or politically. "Conservative" for most of the people I know is a bad word, but conservationist — that's a good word! (laughter) "Conservative" means you don't want anything new—you want always to go back to how things used to be. Whereas conservationists want to do new things to *preserve* the good, to *preserve* beauty, to *preserve* our life — that's what I want.

KRC: When I was studying composition at USC, minus Frank Ticheli and Morten Lauridsen, all of the composers were atonal on faculty.

KM: Really! So you had to go through that.

KRC: I did a bit. I had listening lists, I mean I listened to all kinds of stuff. So I wrote

mostly tonal music, I wrote a couple things that were based on “cells” and things like this, but I just remember feeling in my mind at that time (and I’m sure I was getting that from my education) that I just have to be original. I have to be original in everything I’m doing.

KM: Well, “originality” is like that humorous definition of “life” — it’s what happens when you’re doing something else.

KRC: So it’s not something you can strive for, you don’t believe? Originality, like “oh I can’t do this because it sounds like something else!”

KM: That’s everybody’s problem when they’re starting out. The first thing somebody says when they hear your new piece is, “that reminds me of Ravel” or “Gee, that sounds like a piece of Prokofiev I just heard.” We all try to avoid that. We want the piece to sound like *us* — so “who are we?” We have to figure that out, and the only way we can do it is to just write what we like. Gradually (we hope) it will start sounding more like *us* and less like the people we were admiring. And you’ll find it out yourself, when you notice that something you did was pretty original — that you hadn’t heard or seen before. And it won’t be because you tried to be original — it will be something that you just thought was a great idea. That will be a stepping stone to the next thing perhaps. I don’t know; I’m on shaky ground talking about how one finds his/her own voice. Some of my pieces I’m sure are more “original” than others, and they’re not necessarily better. As you know, my standard advice to young composers is a quotation from Oscar Wilde, “Be yourself; everybody else is already taken.”

KRC: Right. (laughter) Did you ever feel alone in your musical path?

KM: Alone? Well that depends if you mean “alone among my colleagues?”

KRC: I think that's what I mean.

KM: Never personally, because I always had my wife, family and friends (both professional and otherwise), who believed in me and supported me — I've been lucky that way.

KRC: Like kind of the lone person that believed the way you did about music or composing?

KM: Not really. Most music lovers — and most musicians — like tonal music overwhelmingly better than atonal. And I think all serious creators do have to have a certain immodesty; they have to believe that they *are* special in some way— that the sum total of *their* life and *their* skills and *their* experiences have made them unique in a way that gives their music something that nobody else's has. And that's different from feeling alone in the sense that you meant it. I don't feel lonely. I think I feel best about myself and my music when I feel most unique. But my operas have taken a long time to get produced. The first one, *Tartuffe*, was tremendously successful (the most-produced American opera of the 1980s), so why did it take fifteen years to get my second opera produced? And on and on each time. I do get discouraged about that. Sometimes it helps to pick up the full score of *John Brown*, or more lately, *Pride and Prejudice*, and silently read through part of it. I am aware that no impresarios and few conductors can hear it the way I can. And I realize that if I were in the audience I would say "I love this! This is good!" I don't always feel that way about what I write, particularly if I go back later. I don't feel that way about my symphonies. They contain passages that I am proud of, but I don't think any of my symphonies or my chamber music are going to be part of the twentieth-century concert repertoire. But I do believe that my operas will enter the repertoire. Because I've seen how audiences respond to them. Where I want the listeners to laugh they do laugh, where I want tears to flow they do flow. Because I experienced those emotions when I composed the music. So I don't feel alone, I feel

proud of myself. I feel that all I've learned, all I've experienced, everything that happened in my life has focused, has gone into my work, and it makes me happy.

KRC: That's awesome.

KM: By the way, I hope you realize that I'm perfectly aware that a lot of people would judge what I just said as delusional.

KRC: No!

KM: You're not supposed to bare your inner soul so much as that.

KRC: I'm not gonna put this on television.

KM: Okay (laughter). But another side of my feelings about my operas needs to be inserted here. I'm not really that conceited. All that I've just said is true, but that doesn't mean that I am not sometimes despondent, discouraged and view my own work negatively: "Maybe the important companies who never do my operas have good reasons," I tell myself during such low stages. And when I compare my operas to *Otello*, *Figaro*, *Carmen*, *Boheme*, *Jenufa* and many others, I am quickly humbled. Please remember this if you are ever inclined to picture me as a happy-go-lucky, always confident, successful composer.

KRC: So how much of your work as a composer (this is almost for me too, because I have an issue with this)...

KM: That's all right, there are probably a lot of people just like you.

KRC: How much of your work as a composer has been in self-promotion— seeking

performances, commissions, publications?

KM: More than I wish. More than I wish I had to do. At first, not enough. I did very little. I just wrote my music, and I was lucky to win contests, lucky to have publishers. I felt I just needed to write the music and it would get out there and people would keep on performing it! And the pieces were successful; even the First Symphony. The discouragement of seeing the success of my first opera lead to the publisher's total indifference to my next one may have been the thing that made me realize I had to do some promotion myself. G. Schirmer, my publisher, was sold and the new owners had no use for my kind of music. They have never procured a single performance of any of my operas, not even of *Tartuffe* — these have come from word-of-mouth or from my own connections. That soured my professional life for a long time, even though Schirmer — through the excellent work of Hal Leonard, Inc., their distributor — has been very good about promoting my choral music. And the new people at Schirmer in New York are much more appreciative of what I am doing than their predecessors from the previous 25 years were. So I'm hoping for the best.

Of course, there's a difference between being an up-and-coming young composer or even just a notch beyond that: a mainstream composer whom most people in your field know. And then you go fifteen or twenty years beyond that, you are liable to become a has-been. There are young composers coming up (as it should be), others who have risen to that next stage, and you're probably going to be forgotten, or little known by the younger people. It was partly that which induced me to start going to a few more conventions. But there I would sometimes see a colleague for the first time in years and he would turn white. He thought I had died! (laughter) You have to keep producing and you have to keep letting people know you're around.

KRC: Well, we are just about done. So my idea for a dissertation is to talk about your interesting place in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century music. Kind of a broad look at your career and your music, and how it in some cases, stands in contrast to what was happening



around you. Some of your views about music and what it should be. But I don't know how comfortable you feel,

KM: You have all the quotes you need right here in my book.

KRC: I have such a resource here. I don't know if I'm allowed to just have one source!

KM: You can quote things from that; I would rather have you do that than quote word for word what I speak clumsily in the interview. In fact, whenever I'm interviewed, whether for a newspaper or dissertation, I always like to have a chance to tidy it up. What you speak may sound natural, but when you see it in print, you say "Oh Lord, that sounds like Donald Trump." (laughter)

KRC: I guess for me, what I'm saying is that my angle is thinking about your contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> century music, and perhaps looking at what was surrounding you.

KM: I very much appreciate that. I've already told you what I think my chief contribution is: the operas. God knows we *need* better new operas. Opera companies are going to be in trouble for *ever* if they don't get new operas that people *love*. Period! Why don't they see that? I guess they're trying. One American impresario boasts that he commissioned 47 new operas. And one or two were pretty good! But what about the inordinate number that were dead on arrival? "CNN operas" mostly — anything to try to be "relevant. It hurts me to see a bad new opera. The audience leaves the hall asking each other, "How'd you like that?" "Well it was . . . uh . . . 'interesting.'" And they never come to another new opera.

KRC: So you kind of see this as your mission, and your contribution to music.

KM: Well, I can't tell what's going to happen. What I hope for is that opera directors will

catch on to the fact that audiences and most critics love my operas, and produce them more and more. Nothing would make me happier. It would be very good for American opera to have four new operas that they could count on doing well at the box office. (Am I getting delusional again?) But among many impresarios and even music publishers, there seems to be an overwhelming Will-to-Fail. Impressing one's colleagues or critics with a mission for "progress," for "intellectual integrity," for "cutting edge," for "relevance" has made them forget why people love the operas they do: great universal stories, melody, humor, beauty, truth, humanity! They want to laugh or cry — to be delighted or moved, not just by the story, but by the music!

KRC: Well I think, *John Brown* has got to be one of them. Just when I was listening to John Brown, I was . . .

KM: And it's been produced only once. It's premiere came in 2008, just when the financial world collapsed and opera companies retreated into thousands of *Carmens*, *Bohemes* and *Figaros*. Despite some glorious reviews and what the founder called the longest standing ovations Opera KC ever had, it has been forgotten. But the suite from the opera, *Songs of the Slave*, just had its 100<sup>th</sup> performance in Boston's Symphony Hall. A good sign!

KRC: It's phenomenal. And *Tartuffe* is hilarious. And, they're so different! Obviously the subject matter is so different. It's pretty exciting and I hope it happens too.

KM: Well, thank you, thank you!